PARADISE OF EXILES
The Anglo-Florentine Garden

Katie Campbell

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts, Department of Art and Archaeology

May 2007

79,307 words

Abstract

From the unification of Italy in 1865 till the dawn of the Second World War in 1939, English expatriates, inspired by the idea of villa life, settled in the hills around Florence. In his 1970 *Tuscan Villas*, Harold Acton used the term 'Anglo-Florentine' to describe the gardens they created. Though it has been widely adopted, the term is imprecise to the point of meaninglessness. The Anglo-Florentines were a disparate group whose gardens ranged from romantic exuberance through classical austerity to modernist simplicity.

This thesis examines the Anglo-Florentine gardens, both individually and as a group, identifying unique elements and common approaches. It has unearthed lesser-known examples; it has moved beyond scholarly sources to glean information from fiction, amateur art, letters and diaries; it has gone beyond written accounts to physically explore each of the extant sites; and where gardens are no longer traceable, it has speculated on their location and explored those sites. The thesis provides a brief history of the Anglo-Florentine community then explores the idea of Florence in the English imagination tracing the tradition of villa life to its origins in Roman antiquity. After surveying key horticultural texts and other sources of inspiration it investigates the realities of expatriate life and of working the land. It then charts the demise of the Anglo-Florentine community, assesses the legacy of its horticulturists and attempts to clarify the term 'the Anglo-Florentine garden'. The main body of the work is the individual case histories which investigate each garden, assessing the intentions of its owners and its subsequent history.

This dissertation represents the first scholarly attempt to analyse the achievements of Anglo-Florentine garden makers. It considers the idea of the Anglo-Florentine garden promoted in contemporary fiction and recent garden history. It demonstrates that Anglo-Florentine horticulture is much richer and more varied than hitherto believed, and it proposes that the term 'the Anglo-Florentine garden' is really only useful to describe the era and nationality of the garden-makers.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Timothy Mowl, for his unstinting support. I would also like to acknowledge Bristol University and the AHRC for supporting my research. Finally I would like to thank Dr. Jonathan Nelson (Syracuse University, Florence), Frederica Parretti (Villa Il Palmerino), Contessa Lucrezia Fulcis (Villa Maiano), Alan Grieco (I Tatti), Nicholas Dakin-Elliot (La Pietra) and Giorgio Galletti for advice and information.

Declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the Regualtions of the University of Bristol. The work is original, except where indicated by special reference in the text, and no part of this dissertation has been submitted for any other academic award. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED  DATE 05-06-07

Contents

List of Illustrations

PART 1: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

I. Introduction

'Paradise of exiles, refuge of pariahs' [1]

Scholars wishing to visit the final resting place of many of the English expatriates who gathered in Florence in the late nineteenth century have to fight their way through a sea of traffic to reach the island of calm which is the *Cimitero Protestante di Porta a'Pinti* – better known as the English Cemetery. Enclosed in neo-classical walls, punctuated by cypresses, shaded by hedges, it sits in splendid isolation: intimate, insular, elegant and utterly detached from the cacophony of modern life which surges around it.

In 1827 when the Swiss Evangelical Reformed Church of Florence purchased the half acre plot, it was a barren stretch of land just beyond the city walls. Hitherto, Protestant corpses had to be transported to Livorno for burial – an arduous journey marked by religious antagonism, especially in the rural districts through which the cortege had to pass. In the new cemetery Catholic clergy desecrated the earliest graves while local residents resented its absorption of their viewing platform, a low hill curved around an open meadow which served as an impromptu football pitch. The hill itself had been created by centuries of rubbish tossed over the city wall, and to this day ancient artifacts are unearthed from the site.

The Protestant cemetery opened for burials in 1838, though it was closed periodically during the Risorgimento as the Napoleonic Code - introduced during the Emperor's ten year reign over the Kingdom of Italy (1805-1814) - banned burials within city limits. In 1865, in the frenzy of building which followed Florence's naming as capital of the newly unified nation, the north section of the cemetery was annexed and part of the old city wall was demolished to create new roads and suburbs. Five years later when the capital moved to Rome, urban expansion had engulfed the cemetery. In 1887 it was declared full, but a recent rise in interest, sparked by Franco Zefferelli's autobiographical film *Tea with Mussolini*, inspired officials to reopen it for cinerary urns. Though it is still owned by the Swiss Evangelical Church, the cemetery has long

[1] Percy Bysshe Shelley, a letter to his cousin, from Florence, 17 January, 1820.

been known as the *Cimitero degli Inglesi*, partly because many Italians assume all Protestants are English and partly because of the sheer number of English-speakers buried there; though the cemetery houses representatives of sixteen nations, more than half the 1400 graves are British or American.

To the English, Italy had long been synonymous with culture; in the eighteenth century Dr Johnson declared 'a man who has not been to Italy is always conscious of an inferiority,'; in the nineteenth century Vernon Lee asserted 'the word *culture* signified... anything vaguely connected with Italy,' while Phillip Herriton in E.M. Forster's novel *Where Angels Fear To Tread*, expressed the early twentieth-century view, 'I do believe that Italy really purifies and ennobles all who visit her.'[2] And for many of its visitors, Italy *was* Florence, 'that Italy of Italy itself' as one eighteenth century traveller dubbed it.[3]

The British had been welcomed in Florence since the Middle Ages when English mercenaries frequently defended the city. Through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries John Evelyn, John Milton and James Boswell wrote enthusiastically about the city, but it was not until the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815 that English travellers arrived en masse.[4] Some came to visit, delighted to travel again after years of conflict had barred them from the continent. Others came to settle – drawn by the romance and history, the climate and the culture. While expatriates of other nationalities settled in Florence, the English were the largest number, and created the most coherent community. When the Goncourt brothers visited in 1855 they described Florence as '*Ville toute Anglaise*' where 'the palaces are almost the same dismal black as the city of London and where everything seems to smile upon the English'.[5] Two years earlier, the American George Hilliard had wryly observed of the city's expatriates '...the largest portion of these exiles comes from England, that country which is loved by its people

---

[2] John Premble, *The Mediterranean Passion*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987, p. 60; Lee, *For Maurice*, 1927, Forster, p. xxxvi.
[3] Giuliana Treves, *The Golden Ring*, tr. Sylvia Sprigge, Longmans, London, 1956, p. 2.
[4] Between 1819 and 1828 England published on average nine travel books on Italy a year. C.P. Brand, *Italy and the English Romantics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1957, p. 23.
[5] David Leavitt, *Florence, a Delicate Case*, Bloomsbury, London, 2002, p. 43.

with such pugnacious patriotism while they are always running away from its taxes, its dull climate, its sea-coal fires, and the grim exclusiveness of its society.'[6]

Among these foreign residents, many, of both sexes, were fleeing family responsibilities, gender stereotypes and social ostracisation - another Napoleonic legacy being the refusal to criminalize homosexuality. Others were simply avoiding the humiliations of genteel poverty. Those who could not afford an urban palazzo could rent rooms in the decaying dwellings of impecunious aristocrats.

The idea of Italy had long captured the English imagination; from the 1840s 'The Italian Question' was frequently debated in Parliament and the issue of unification roused Protestant England 'to its greatest moral crusade since the campaign against slavery.'[7] Nonetheless the battle to achieve Italian unity - particularly during the mid-nineteenth century - drove many expatriates home, despite the efforts of the English-language *Athenaeum* newspaper, which, in a 1847 article, entitled 'A word to those elderly Ladies of both sexes who are afraid of coming into Tuscany, because it is in a state of revolution', assures readers that the revolutionaries are friendly and the revolution benign: 'Institutions have been abolished, remodelled, founded with infinitely less danger than often attends a popular election at home.'[8]

When Italy was unified in 1865, Florence, as temporary capital, undertook a programme of expansion which left it deeply in debt; this made labour, services and accommodation cheap enough to entice foreign residents.[9] Through most of the nineteenth century it took up to four weeks to get by horse-drawn vehicle from London to Florence – a

---

[6] Treves, p. 6, quoting Hillard, *Six Months in Italy*, London, 1853, Vol. 1, p. 144.
[7] Premble, p. 10.
[8] Treves p. 31.
[9] Though food and accommodation were cheap, fuel and transport were not, forcing many visitors to remain abroad for several years before they could realize any gain from living in exile. Venice also became a magnet for affluent expatriates when, in 1866, the Austrians withdrew from Lombardy-Venetia as Venice joined the new Kingdom of Italy. The ensuing collapse in property values meant that even those of modest means could afford to rent, or buy, in the city. By 1894 Henry James complained, 'Venice is full, the hotels overflow and I meet every hour somebody I know of who knows me'. Henry James, *Italian Hours*, Houghton, Boston, 1909, p. 69.

journey time not altered since the days of the Roman Empire.[10] With the development of the steam train however, travel became safer, quicker and more comfortable. By the late 1890s Lady Paget delightedly recounts how she left Florence at 3pm and reached London at 11pm the next evening.[11] With such easy transport links there was little to stop them; by 1869 thirty thousand of the city's two hundred thousand inhabitants were British or American and by 1900 Anglo-Saxons represented one sixth of the resident population.[12] Instead of adventurers and political idealists, this new wave of expatriates consisted largely of art enthusiasts. Decades of political turmoil had impoverished local aristocrats, forcing them to abandon their estates and sell off their possessions. This created a steady supply of crumbling villas, classical antiques, Renaissance art and nineteenth-century fakes which attracted all manner of connoisseurs, collectors, dealers and forgers for whom, as Mabel Luhan notes, art was more important than people: 'Pictures had the same, or even a greater value than persons, and the painted madonnas and saints assumed, through the skill of the artist who was responsible for them, an esthetic importance that far exceeded the merely human lives they stood for.'[13]

While a few turned to the urban palazzi like their pre-unification forebears, most followed the fantasy of rural *otium* described by Pliny in the first century AD. Free from revolutionaries for the first time in centuries the Tuscan hills attracted these latter-day Medici to colonize the countryside, restore the villas, create enchanting gardens and rescue the landscape from decades of neglect.

Odd friendships flourished amid the expatriate community, reflecting proximity as much as temperament. To the south, beyond the Porta Romana the young American Mabel Luhan befriended the aging English aristocrat Lady Paget whose Torre Bellosguardo spread its enfolding wings round her own Villa Curiona. Across the city Sir John Temple Leader created a robust medieval-style fortress at Vincigliata, while his neighbour Lady Crawford restored her Villa Palmieri in a gentler, romantic style

---

[10] Pemble, p. 19.
[11] Lady Paget, *In My Tower*, Hutchinson, London, 1924, p. 306.
[12] Richard Turner, *La Pietra*, Edizioni Olivares, Florence, 2004, p. 27.
[13] Luhan, p. 137.

more evocative of Boccaccio's ladies than King Arthur's knights. On the nearby hillside known as Montughi, after the ancient Ughi family, dealer Arthur Acton forged a useful alliance with the eccentric collector Frederick Stibbert. Above them sat the Fiesole hillside which Aldous Huxley acidly described as 'villadom'.[14] In the hillside village of San Domenico lived the essayist Vernon Lee to whom the young Bernard Berenson brought his first tentative letter of introduction. Also in San Domenico lived the essayist Janet Ross to whom Mary Berenson would signal from her terrace at I Tatti, to confirm each day's engagements while her husband forged a more intimate liason with Sybil Cutting, the bluestocking who lived in the ancient Villa Medici, Fiesole, across the road from Le Balze which his old friend Charles Strong had built.

Though none of them had a particular interest in horticulture per se, each of these exiles created unique garden settings for their lives. Despite respectful reference to such authorities as Boccaccio's fourteenth-century novel *Decameron*, Alberti's fifteenth-century architectural treatise *De re aedificatoria* and Gozzoli's fifteenth-century murals for the Medici chapel [1], these Anglo-Florentines evolved a unique interpretation of Italian horticulture which Harold Acton described as 'Anglo-Fiorentino'.[15]

In *Friendship*, her 1878 novel about the community, the novelist known as 'Ouida' placed at the heart of her story a venerable hilltop villa overlooking 'vineyards, and gardens golden with orange fruit and bright with Bengal roses, the width of the green Campagna'.[16] In his 1907 guide, *Italian Gardens*, the English architect George Elgood enumerated the features of the ideal villa: 'the parterre spread out beneath the windows... shady places near at hand; fountains with plentiful water supply; and beyond the garden, away towards the hilly background, wild woodland stretches.'[17] In his 1919 *Our Villa in Italy* Joseph Lucas tells of his search for 'a villa centuries old, with an interesting pedigree clinging to it like the smell of old lavender... a home with walls weather–stained and thick' with a garden 'with fine old flourishing trees, casting

[14] Kinta Beevor, *A Tuscan Childhood*, Viking, London, 1993, p. 105.
[15] Harold Acton, *Tuscan Villas*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1970, p. 170.
[16] Ouida, *Friendship*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1914, p. 86; for a fuller discussion of Ouida and her role in the Anglo-Florentine community, see appendix.
[17] George Elgood, *Italian Gardens*, Longman, London, 1907, p. 74.

deep, cool shadows' and 'a loggia facing south where we could sit and dream the sunny hours away.'[18] In her autobiography Iris Origo describes the estate she sought as a young married woman: 'one of the fourteenth – or fifteenth-century villas which were then almost as much a part of the Tuscan landscape as the hills on which they stood'. She evokes a long cypress-lined avenue, a little courtyard with a well, and 'a garden with a fountain and an overgrown hedge of box.'[19]

These descriptions, separated by fifty years and several generations, reveal the consistency of the Anglo-Florentine villa fantasy. For almost a century, from the unification of Italy till the outbreak of the Second World War, the fantasy prevailed. It is this image of villa life, the community which subscribed to it, and the gardens they created, that this thesis will explore.

Historiography

Since Harold Acton coined the term in his 1970 *Tuscan Villas*, 'the Anglo-Florentine garden' has been used to describe the gardens created by Florence's English expatriate community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.[20] As early as 1904 Edith Wharton was deploring the English 'Anglicization of the Tuscan garden', rueing the parterres lost to 'the Britannic craving for a lawn' and the venerable orchards supplanted by 'the thinly dotted specimen trees so dear to the English landscape gardener'.[21] Acton described the Anglo-Florentine style as one in which 'the Tuscan elements have been cleverly adapted rather than absorbed', and 'the the scale as well as the dainty precision of the details is more English than Florentine.'[22] This dismissive tone has been adopted by other recent critics; Tim Richardson describes the style as 'Neo-Renaissance Italian gardens for non-Italian clients'.[23] Helena Atlee describes it as 'a peculiarly English neo-Renaissance style'.[24] Charles Quest-Ritson condemns the

[18] Joseph Lucas, *Our Villa in Tuscany*, Unwin, London, 1913, p. 15.
[19] Iris Origo, *Images and Shadows*, Murray, London, 1970, p. 199.
[20] Acton, *Tuscan Villas*, p. 170.
[21] Edith Wharton, *Italian Villas and their Gardens*, The Century Company, New York, 1904, p. 21.
[22] Acton, *Villas*, p. 170.
[23] Tim Richardson, *English Gardens in the Twentieth Century*, Arum Press, London, 2005, p. 94.
[24] Helena Attlee, *Italian Gardens*, Ellipsis, London, 2000, p. 227.

Anglo-Florentine's efforts as 'pastiche'.[25] Even Origo claimed that the English villa owners 'scrupulously preserved the clipped box and cypress hedges of the formal Italian gardens, they yet also introduced a note of home: a Dorothy Perkins rambling among the vines and the wisteria on the pergola, a herbaceous border on the lower terrace, and comfortable wicker chairs upon the lawns.'[26]

The common perception appears to be that the Anglo-Florentines married Tuscan austerity with English exuberance, smothering villa walls in scented climbers, filling olive groves with colourful shrubs, under-planting vines with flowering bulbs, replacing gravel terraces with grass lawns, substituting herbaceous borders for formal walks, filling box-edged parterres with colourful bedding plants, placing deciduous trees in evergreen parks and shocking the neighbours by digging in the dirt alongside hired labourers. While this parody reflects some truth, this thesis will reveal that Anglo-Florentine horticulture was much more subtle, and more varied, than the cliché would suggest.

Despite the widespread use of the term, the Anglo-Florentine garden has not yet been scrutinized by academics. While there are numerous studies on Italian gardens, the Italianate style and English gardens abroad, there appears to be no literature specifically about the Anglo-Florentine garden. The academic journal *Garden History* has not published a single article on the subject in the thirty-six years it has been in print. The more literary *Hortus* has published numerous articles on English gardens in Italy, but apart from my own, 'The Renaissance Revisited: Cecil Pinsent and the Anglo-Florentine Garden', it has not addressed this particular community of garden makers.[27] Similarly, specialized journals as the *Architectural Review* and *The Gardener's Chronicle*, and more general magazines such as *Gardens Illustrated* and *Country Life* have published articles on the most famous of the gardens, but none has addressed the horticulture of the community as a whole.

---

[25] Charles Quest-Ritson, *The English Garden Abroad*, Viking, London, 1992, p. 127.
[26] Origo, *Images*, p. 128.
[27] *Hortus 73*, Spring 2005, p. 45-54.

Generally the fame of individual Anglo-Florentine gardens rests on the fame of their owners. The rediscovery of Origo by feminists, historians and horticulturists, provoked by Caroline Moorehead's magnificent biography in 2000, has ensured recent coverage of Origo's La Foce.[28] In the 1990s Acton's La Pietra was popular as interest in the estate was sparked by controversy over the inheritance after Acton's death.[29] Earlier, Berenson's I Tatti was probably the most popular Anglo-Florentine garden, since Meryle Secrest's 1979 biography and Nicky Mariano's 1966 memoir kept Berenson in the public eye, as did Barbara Strachey's 1983 edition of the letters of her grandmother, Mary Berenson.[30] In the mid-century there was little interest in Anglo-Florentine gardens and in the early years Janet Ross' Poggio Gherardo was best known because Ross herself was famous through her books on Italian subjects: *Italian Sketches* (1887); *Leaves from our Tuscan Kitchen* (1899), *Old Florence Modern Tuscany* (1904), and *Lives of the Early Medici* (1910).[31]

These well-known examples of Anglo-Florentine horticulture feature in recent guides to Italian gardens, although such guides are of limited use to the garden historian as the entries are generally confined to botanical highlights, giving only a brief history of the gardens, and often that concentrates on Renaissance rather than later Anglo-Florentine history. While such eminent writers as Penelope Hobhouse in *Gardens of Italy*, Attlee in *Italian Gardens* and Mariachiara Pozzana in *Gardens of Florence and Tuscany* evoke the community, they neglect to address the question of what, if anything is meant by 'the Anglo-Florentine' style.[32] Similarly, in his 1992 *The English Garden Abroad* Quest-Ritson highlights individual gardens and their eccentric owners without attempting to define any consistent features or trace any patterns within the

---

[28] Caroline Moorehead, *Iris Origo, Marchessa of Val D'Orcia*, Murray, London, 2000.
[29] John Follain, Over my Dead Body, *The Guardian, review*, 21 May, 2004.
[30] Nicky Mariano, *Forty Years With Berenson, Hamish Hamilton*, London, 1966; Meryle Secrest, *Being Bernard Berenson*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1980; Barbara Strachey and Jayne Samuels, *Mary Berenson: A Self-Portrait from her Letters and Diaries*, Gollancz, London, 1983.
[31] Janet Ross, *Italian Sketches*, Kegan Paul, London 1887; Janet Ross, *Leaves From Our Tuscan Kitchen*, John Murray, London 1899; Janet Ross, *Florentine Palaces and their Stories*, J.M. Dent, London, 1905; Janet Ross, *Old Florence Modern Tuscany*, J.M. Dent, London 1904, Janet Ross, *Lives of the Early Medici*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1910.
[32] Penelope Hobhouse, *Gardens of Italy*, Mitchell Beazley, London, 1998; Helena Attlee, *Italian Gardens*, Ellipsis, London, 2000; Mariachiara Pozzana, *Gardens of Florence and Tuscany*, Giunti, Florence, 2001.

community.[33] David Ottewill, in his comprehensive *The Edwardian Garden* (1989) avoids the term 'Anglo-Florentine;' though he does devote a section to Cecil Pinsent's work in Florence.[34] Georgina Masson's 1961 *Italian Gardens,* which revived interest in the subject, refers to several of the villas, but she doesn't identify them as Anglo-Florentine, and she focuses on their Renaissance incarnations.

The Anglo-Florentine community itself has been explored in such books as *The Golden Ring: The Anglo-Florentines 1847-1862, The Paradise of Exiles: Tuscany and the British,* and *Famous Foreigners in Florence: 1400-1900,* though these books have few horticultural references.[35] Similarly the lives of individual Anglo-Florentines have been covered in numerous biographies and critical studies however; these give scant attention to the gardens. Peter Gunn's biography of Vernon Lee says nothing about her horticultural interests though she had a profound effect on Anglo-Florentine horticulture with her rediscovery of the baroque and her promotion of this style for gardens.[36]

Cecil Pinsent, the other major influence on Anglo-Florentine horticulture, is similarly overlooked. As late as 1961 Masson neglects to mention him by name, though she does aver that his work at the Villa Capponi was done: 'with great sensitivity so that these twentieth century additions to the original garden do not mar its character'.[37] It was not until the 1990s that Ethne Clarke brought Pinsent into the limelight in a scholarly article on his life; sadly, her long awaited biography is still pending.[38] In an earlier symposium devoted to Pinsent's work, Clarke's contribution is rather naïve, concerned primarily with proving that Pinsent rather than his more famous partner Geoffrey Scott, was responsible for their garden designs.[39] Richard Dunn, Scott's biographer, spent

---

[33] Charles Quest-Ritson, *The English Garden Abroad,* Viking, London, 1992.
[34] David Ottewill, *The Edwardian Garden,* Yale University Press, London, 1989.
[35] Giuliana Treves, tr. Sylvia Sprigge, *The Golden Ring: The Anglo-Florentines 1847-1862,* Longmans, London, 1956; Olive Hamilton, *The Paradise of Exiles: Tuscany and the British,* Andre Deutsch, London, 1974; *Famous Foreigners in Florence: 1400-1900,* C.L. Dentler, Bemporad Marzocco, Florence, 1964.
[36] Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee Violet Paget,* Oxford University Press, London, 1964.
[37] Masson, p. 82.
[38] Ethne Clarke, 'A Biography of Cecil Ross Pinsent, 1884-1963', *Garden History,* Vol. 26, no 2, Winter 1998, pp 176-207.
[39] Ethne Clarke, 'Cecil Pinsent: A Biography', *Cecil Pinsent and his Gardens in Tuscany,* Symposium papers, Georgetown University, Fiesole 22 June, 1995; Edifir, Florence, 1996, pp 15-32.

much of his lecture at the same symposium, suggesting, unconvincingly, that Scott was the dominant partner.[40] Vincent Shacklock was more concerned with Pinsent's client, Charles Strong, than the designer himself.[41]

Moorehead's biography of Origo has many references to Pinsent who restored Origo's mother's garden and helped Origo create her own, but the focus is on the relationship between patron and clients.[42] Secrest's biography of Berenson makes much of Berenson's relationship with Scott, but says little about Pinsent, who was largely responsible for the garden at I Tatti, as he was for most of the significant Anglo-Florentine gardens of the twentieth century.[43]

It is probable that scholars have shied clear of the Anglo-Florentine garden because there is so little documentary evidence on the subject. As late as 1898 a journalist for the *Gardener's Chronicle* revealed how little information there was on the subject, when he began his piece on Poggio Gherardo with: 'I had been lamenting that I could find no gardens in Florence'.[44] At the time Georgina Graham, Lady Paget, Lady Scott, the Crawfords, Sir John Temple Leader and Sir William Spence already had mature gardens which would doubtless have been accessible to an enterprising journalist. It must be remembered that gardens were simply a backdrop to the busy lives of their owners; few were involved the actual process of sourcing material, designing, building, planting or daily maintenance. This is why very little archival information about the actual gardens has survived. The British Institute in Florence holds the papers of Vernon Lee, Janet Ross, and Ross's niece Lina Waterfield. Lee's papers have nothing about her garden, though the current owners of her villa, whose parents purchased it on Lee's death, have some interesting photographs and sketches. Ross's photograph albums contain many poignant photos of annual agricultural rituals but her papers have nothing of interest to the garden historian. Waterfield kept a few letters written by her

---

[40] Ibid., Richard Dunn, 'An Architectural Partnership: Cecil Pinsent & Geoffrey Scott', pp 33-50.
[41] Ibid., Vincent Shacklock, 'A Philosopher's Garden: Pinsent's Work for Charles Augustus Strong at Villa Le Balze', Fiesole, pp 71-118.
[42] Caroline Moorehead, *Iris Origo, Marchesa of Val D'Orcia*, Murray, London, 2000.
[43] Meryle Secrest, *Being Bernard Berenson*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1980.
[44] No author named, 'An Italian Garden', *Gardener's Chronicle*, 11 May 1912, p. 315.

husband while he was supposed to be designing Berenson's garden at I Tatti, but apart from these, once again, there is nothing of horticultural interest.[45]

There are no archives for Lady Paget and the current owners of her villa know nothing about her. While they have no remaining papers for Sir John Temple Leader, the owners of his estate have some interesting photographs of both the garden at Villa Maiano where he lived, and the grounds at Vincigliata, the castle he rebuilt nearby. Though the Acton archives have been closed to the public for several years, Nicholas Dakin-Elliot, the head gardener, assured me they contain nothing of interest to the garden historian. The current owners of the Villa Medici, who purchased it from Cutting's daughter, have recently published a book about the villa, containing all the relevant papers regarding the garden.[46] The Berenson archives, housed at I Tatti, have some interesting correspondence between Mary Berenson and Cecil Pinsent, but as most discussion regarding the garden would have been conducted face-to-face there is not much of use; similarly there is nothing of interest at the archive at Le Balze which Pinsent designed for Charles Strong. As Pinsent ruthlessly culled his papers and destroyed most remaining documents before his death, the Pinsent archive at RIBA offers no new insights either.

Because of the absence of documentary evidence, the garden-makers' intentions must be teased from other sources: their choice in art and literature, architecture and interior decoration, the entertainments they indulged in and, crucially, the books they wrote. Fiction such as Ouida's *Friendship*, Aldous Huxley's *These Barren Leaves*, Forster's *A Room With a View* and Somerset Maugham's *Up at the Villa* describe the community's horticultural pretensions; studies such as Acton's *Tuscan Villas*, Ross's *Lives of the Early Medici, Old Florence* and *Florentine Palaces*, Lee's *Studies of the Eighteenth Century* and Origo's *Merchant of Prato* reveal the general interest in Italy's past. A slew of horticultural texts beginning with Charles Platt's 1894 *Italian Gardens* and Edith Wharton's 1904 *Italian Villas*, through Sir George Sitwell's 1909 *On The Making*

[45] These are kept in the Janet Ross Archive at the British Institute, Florence.
[46] Donata Mazzini, *Villa Medici, Fiesole: Leon Battista Alberti and the Prototype of the Renaissance Villa*, Centro Di, Florence, 2004.

of Gardens, to Rose Nichols's 1928 *Italian Pleasure Gardens* chart the growing interest in Italian horticulture, both within and beyond the community. One can also follow the texts which influenced the community's aesthetics, from Burckhardt's 1860 *The Civilization of the Renaissance*, through Ruskin's 1877 *Mornings in Florence* to Pater's 1873 *The Renaissance*. But it is the memoirs of the period which offer the richest information. A remarkably literate, articulate and prolific community, the Anglo-Florentines had a powerful compulsion to record their experience, as though to justify their exile to distant family and friends.

The typical Anglo-Florentine story, told with remarkable consistency throughout the community, entailed falling in love with Tuscan culture, discovering a crumbling villa and carefully restoring it despite being thwarted by malicious bureaucrats and incompetent builders. The dwelling would then be furnished with antiques acquired at favourable prices from impoverished aristocrats, ignorant peasants or unscrupulous curates. Finally, a garden would be painstakingly squeezed from the alien soil – an experience which was either enhanced or diminished by the quaint customs of the local workers. Once they had perfected the setting many members of the community dealt in art and antiques: William Spence, Janet Ross, Arthur Acton and Bernard Berenson, all – to a greater or lesser degree sold or arranged the sale of goods for affluent clients. Others wrote historical books or essays: Sitwell, Sybil Cutting, Origo, Berenson, Ross, Acton and Lee. Still others wrote diaries or books about their experience of villa life: Joseph Lucas, Georgina Graham and Lady Paget. A few – Lucas, Origo and Ross - also turned their hand to farming. Combining ancient wisdom with modern technology these latter day Virgils lived out their days against the spectacle of rural rituals, duly recorded for publication. Indeed so common was this practice that Mable Luhan observed: 'It is perhaps foolish to write here of these things that everybody in the whole world has already written about,' before proceeding to add her own account to the record.[47]

[47] Mabel Dodge Luhan, *European Experiences*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1935, p. 136.

Luhan's *European Experiences* is the memoir which probably gives the most interesting insights into the community. Because this strong-willed American heiress abandoned villa life after a decade, she was more honest than many of the community's more obsequious chroniclers. As with many of her cohorts, however, she was more interested in people than places, indeed she notes with disarming candor: 'I believe I only really *knew* Italy in the early days before I made friends there,' noting also, 'people have nothing to do with the *genius loci*... Even if people mould the iron gates, plant the cypresses and smooth the rocks, they do not create that mysterious spirit that takes possession there.' [48] For actual facts Lucas's *Our Villa in Italy* and Graham's *In A Tuscan Garden* both describe the process of building and running a garden; unlike most Anglo-Florentine memoirs theirs are not filled with recollections of people. Both writers are obscure; no account exists of their lives before or after their Tuscan sojourns and neither of their gardens survive, suggesting that the fame of the owner is one of the greatest guarantees of the endurance of the garden.

David Leavitt wryly described the classic recipe for Anglo-Florentine writings as: 'Garden know-how combined with gossip which usually devolves, at some point, into a catalogue of the famous, glimpsed and chatted with.'[49] This ignores the rich stream of letters, memoirs, essays, guides, histories, romance, biography, autobiography, criticism and even cookbooks which flowed from the community. And it is these, as well as the physical gardens themselves, which provide the greatest clues as to the intentions and aspirations of the Anglo-Florentine garden makers.

[48] Ibid., p. 99.
[49] David Leavitt, *Florence: A Delicate Case*, Bloomsbury, London, 2002. p.49.

II. Villa Life and the Idea of Florence

'These many-memoried streets...'[50]

While the ancient Romans used the villa as a respite from public life and the Renaissance merchants saw it as an antidote to city commerce, for the Anglo-Florentines the villa represented an escape from modern life. Luhan wryly recounts: 'everyone played with the past in Florence. It was the material of their day'.'[51] Similarly, Acton describes Florence as a 'retreat... a backwater. All serious people under forty came to Florence to apply themselves to some period of the past.'[52] Huxley's 1925 *roman a clef, Those Barren Leaves*, viciously lampoons the Anglo-Florentines' preoccupation with the past.[53] His protagonist - ambitious English blue-stocking who yearns to recreate the glories of the Renaissance- buys a crumbling villa and feels she is purchasing a nation and its history: 'Everything it contained [was] her property and her secret. She had bought its arts, its music, its melodious language, its literature, its wine and cooking, the beauty of its women and the virility of its Fascists'.[54]

Conspicuously ignoring the industrial city around them, the Anglo-Florentines retreated to the countryside, seeking the places which, though ancient and foreign, were familiar from their classical educations. Virtually every observation was shaped by literary and artistic associations; as Kinta Beevor observed: 'The history of the place made our make-believe unusually vivid.'[55] To understand the Anglo-Florentine community, therefore, it is essential to understand the region's history.

The Etruscans

Wellspring of the Renaissance, crucible of both capitalism and republicanism, Florence had long been heralded as the birthplace of the modern world. Even more potent,

---

[50] Henry James, *Italian Hours*, 1909, repub'd, 1979 Grove Press, NY p. 269.
[51] Luhan, p. 101.
[52] Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 148.
[53] Though now largely forgotten, Leonard Woolf, who knew the protagonists, described the novel as 'brilliant and daring'. Jacket, sleeve, Huxley, *Those Barren Leaves*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1969.
[54] Moorehead, p. 70.
[55] Beevor, p. 101.

however, was the legacy of its earlier inhabitants, the Etruscans. Said to be the most ancient and civilized of Italy's indigenous tribes, these mysterious people had long captured the imagination of the English; in *Paradise Lost* Milton evoked the 'Etruscan shadows' haunting the woods around Florence while Byron described Florence as 'the Etruscan Athens'.[56]

In the sixth century BC *Etruria* extended north to the Po valley and south to the Bay of Naples, providing an early example of Italian nationhood; by the nineteenth century nothing remained except some painted tombs and a few references in Latin texts, nonetheless the image of this once-great empire continued to inspire the English. When remnants of an Etruscan wall were discovered at his Villa Medici, William Spence erected a plaque to commemorate the event [2]. A generation later the young Origo scrambled over 'the great stone blocks' of that same wall: 'without which the sunny hillside might have seemed a little tame.'[57] Later, she proudly notes that her own estate at La Foce housed Etruscan villages in the fifth century BC.[58]

Despite the absence of any substantiating evidence, Harold Eberlein described the Etruscans as 'mysterious, clever people... from whom the early Romans learned their most gracious arts'.[59] The Etruscan necropolis at Cornato was a favourite outing for the expatriate community as Lady Paget describes: 'Some of the tombs were so fresh they brought one quite near that strange and mysterious people in whom love of life and its luxuries and pleasures seems so blended with a longing for the hereafter'.[60] Huxley satirizes such morbid nostalgia, having his protagonists rhapsodise about an indecipherable inscription on an Etruscan tumulus.[61] In the turbulent 1920s DH Lawrence spent his final days writing an idyllic evocation of a joyful, natural civilization, in contrast to his own rational, industrial world. Though it was clearly a

---

[56] Sica, *Of Queens Gardens*, p. 19.
[57] Origo, *Images and Shadows*, p. 116.
[58] Ibid., p. 200.
[59] Eberlein, p. 23. Equally fancifully, he attributes two favourite elements of Mediterranean architecture, the cortile and loggia, to the Etruscans, solely because these features appear in their tomb paintings.
[60] Paget, *Linings*, p. 262.
[61] Huxley, p. 309.

dying man's fantasy of a life-affirming culture, the immediate success of *Etruscan Places* demonstrates the potency of the Etruscan myth in the English imagination. [62]

The Romans

While Etruria may have represented life and liberty for nineteenth-century Anglo-Florentines, in the fourth century BC the Etruscans were conquered by Rome. Several centuries later, in 59 BC, Julius Caesar established the colony of *Florentia*, setting aside the fertile valley at the heart of former Etruria for retired army veterans. With its lush surroundings and the waterways of the Arno River, the Roman colony flourished, supporting the sort of villa life which centuries later inspired 'those unmistakable representatives of Albion, (who) took root among the vineyards and became a part of the landscape.'[63]

One of the earliest books of Latin prose to survive is Cato's second century BC *De Re Rustica*, a treatise on rural life which offers practical advice on such subjects as the setting of dwellings and the medical virtues of vegetables. Cosimo de Medici owned one of the few copies of the book and his Renaissance interpretation of the Roman villa was an inspiration to the Anglo-Florentines five hundred years later.[64]

When Cato wrote his treatise, Roman expansion was already changing agricultural practice. As grain could be imported cheaply from colonies in Sicily and North Africa, Roman farmers began to concentrate on olives and grapes. Small farms were being absorbed into larger agricultural estates, generating enormous wealth and creating a new class of land-owners who had little contact with the land. With their estates overseen by managers and worked by slaves or employees, these new land-owners began to build dwellings for relaxation rather than work, initiating the concept of the *villeggiatura* or seasonal retreat to the country estate.

---

[62] Its poignancy is enhanced by the fact that the book was published two years after the writer's premature death from tuberculosis.
[63] Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 9.
[64] Dale V Kent, *Cosimo de Medici and the Florentine Renaissance*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2000, p. 299.

By the first century BC when Varro wrote his own *De Re Rustica*, the villa had evolved from simple agricultural estate to suburban pleasure ground incorporating aviaries, ornamental fish ponds and exotic animals. In the first century AD, Pliny the Younger was advocating the restorative *otium* or leisure of a rural sojourn as an antidote to the *negotium* or business of city life. The classical writer most beloved by the Anglo-Florentines however, was Publius Virgilius Maro, the gentleman farmer who wrote a four-part pastoral poem celebrating rural life while advising, respectively, on crops, olive groves and vineyards, animals and beekeeping.[65] Virgil's *Georgics* was a staple of the British classical education; indeed Rolland Barthes suggests that the very name Virgil operates as 'a kind of citation: that of an era of bygone, calm, leisurely, even decadent studies: English preparatory schools, Latin verses, desks, lamps, tiny pencil annotations'.[66]

The Anglo-Florentines were quick to find Virgilian allusions in their own lives. Like many of her compatriots, Ouida praised gardens as being 'such as Horace and Virgil used to move in.'[67] Those who worked the land were even more conscious of their classical forebears; Ross asserted 'the best commentary on the *Georgics* is still agriculture in action in Tuscany'.[68] Elsewhere she claimed that local techniques had changed so little that Virgil's descriptions 'could pass muster with any peasant of the present day.' She also points out that 'vines are still planted and trained as in Virgil's day,' and that bee hives are made of hollowed willow trunks mortared with clay, 'very

---

[65] At about the same time, c 30 BC Vitruvius's *De Architectura*, the first known treatise on architecture, expounds in great detail on the components of the villa. Mixing expert advice, common sense, and folk wisdom he advises on the placing of granaries and cellars to avoid the danger of fire, advocates placing baths near the villa entrance to service the workers coming in from the fields, and suggests that cows should be tethered facing east so the sun can burnish their coats. A century later Columella, a Roman landowner wrote yet another *De Re Rustica* (c 60-65AD) which, though written in verse as a response to Virgil, is one of the most practical of the Roman agricultural treatises, dealing with such issues as layout, soil preparation, fertilizers, water supply and crops to be grown.

[66] Quotation from Roland Barthes, cited in Richard Leeman, *Cy Twombly, a Monograph*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2004, p. 90.

[67] Ouida, p. 178.

[68] Ross, *Italian Sketches*, p. 112.

like what is described in the *Georgics*'.[69] Several decades later Origo noted that the rogation rites practiced by her tenants were similar to those described by Virgil and the prayer used by her priest was similar to one quoted in Cato's *De Agricoltura*.[70]

As the rural idyll depicted by classical writers depended on peace and prosperity, the *villeggiatura* began to disappear around the fourth century when the fall of the Roman Empire in the west meant the countryside began to fill with bandits and soldiers. Many villas were fortified, becoming the castles and monasteries which still dot the Italian landscape; others were simply abandoned as people retreated to the safety of walled cities and towns. Fields were left uncultivated, forests flourished and savage beasts began to proliferate. Florence itself fell in the sixth century when it was taken by Goths from the north during the invasions which marked the end of the Roman Empire. Eventually absorbed into the Holy Roman Empire, for the next few centuries Florence was ruled by imperial margraves. It was the last of these, Countess Matilda, who set the city on its way to greatness once again. After escaping abduction by the German Emperor, the Margravine switched her allegiance to the papacy in the protracted disputes between emperor and pope. On her death in 1115 she granted the city independence, enabling it to pursue the republican and capitalist programmes which were to provide such inspiration to the later Anglo-Florentines.

Medieval Florence

The newly independent city was governed by an elected council of one hundred men known as the *signoria*. Acton proudly notes how several early owners of his villa, had been members of the *signoria*, a distinction which Origo also notes of her neighbours' ancestors. This august body operated from a turreted palace in the heart of Florence, also known as the Signoria - a building whose elegant watch tower came to represent the era [3]. In the late nineteenth century Temple Leader copied it in his Villa Maiano [4]; a generation later Sitwell purchased a crumbling fortress whose only virtue was the fact that its tower resembled the Signoria [5].

---

[69] Janet Ross, *Old Florence Modern Tuscany*, Dent, London, 1904, p. 126-132.
[70] Origo, *Images*, p. 208, unnumbered footnote.

This mercantile period held such a powerful sway over the Anglo-Florentine imagination, possibly because many of them owed their wealth to the success of recent ancestors in trade; Origo wrote her most renowned book, *The Merchant of Prato*, about Francesco Datini, a fourteenth-century merchant, while many of Ross's essays, such as those in *Old Florence and Modern Tuscany*, concentrate on the same period. Despite the much lauded participation of the people, however, fourteenth-century Florence was still, essentially, ruled by the wealthy elite. The *signoria* consisted of eight executives, known as the *priori,* under the leadership of a *gonfaloniere* - whose powers were limited by his two month tenure. Six of the priori came from the greater guilds, the *Arti Maggiori*, consisting of bankers, merchants and lawyers, while only two came from the more numerous but less powerful *Arti Minori* consisting of shopkeepers and craftsmen.[71] Despite this lack of true representation, in an era dominated by absolute rulers the medieval government of Florence provided an image of popular power which remained potent into the nineteenth century when Elizabeth Barrett Browning decorated her Casa Guidi salon in green, red and white in honour of the - then illegal - Florentine flag [6].

With its republican government, flourishing guilds and strong economy based on banking and textiles, Florence soon emerged as the most powerful city in the region.[72] By the fourteenth century it was the richest city in Europe, though its stability was undermined by the ongoing battle between the papacy - represented by the Guelphs, and the emperor - represented by the Ghibellines. Ironically it was these tumultuous times that engendered three of Italy's most accomplished writers: Dante (1265-1321), Petrarch (1304-1374) and Boccaccio (1313-1375).[73] This literary triumvirate was like a

---

[71] Despite this suggestion of democracy, the majority of the urban and rural population remained unrepresented, a situation which reached a head in 1378 when the Ciompi or day labourers of Florence rioted after their attempts to gain a place in government failed.

[72] Though this period was later romanticised as the beginning of modern democracy, strict social hierarchies prevailed. To protect the prosperity of its citizens, Florence gradually colonised the surrounding communities taking Fiesole in 1125, conquering Prato and Pistoia in the early 14th c., Volterra, Arezzo and Montepulciano in the late 14th c and Pisa, Cortona and Livorno in the early 15th c.

[73] Petrarch travelled widely, collecting Greek and Roman manuscripts and studying the humanism of the ancients. By promoting a humanist approach to literature, philosophy and history Petrarch helped wean his countrymen from the oppressive Christian approach of the Middle Ages to focus on human achievements rather than attempting to interpret God.

mascot to the Anglo-Florentines. On first approaching the city in the early nineteenth century Frances Trollope felt she was about 'to enter bodily into the presence of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio'.[74] In her 1874 novel *Pascarel*, Ouida claims, of the Italian garden: 'It holds Boccaccio between its walls, all Petrarca in its leaves, all Raffaelle in its skies.'[75]

Of the three, Dante was perhaps the most appealing. Known as 'the great fugitive' he was banished in a dispute between Guelph factions, and spent his life in exile, writing lyrically about his lost homeland, the chosen home of the Anglo-Florentines.[76] Though her own medieval villa could name such illustrious owners as the Capponi banking dynasty and the Medici architect Michelozzo Michelozzi, Lady Paget was proudest of the fact that the first owner was Guido Cavalcanti, whose only claim to fame was the fact that he had been a friend of Dante. In her memoirs Paget frequently speculates that Dante must have spent time in the villa and surveyed the same view as she; indeed she describes the loggia as like 'a picture on a *quatro cento cassone*'.[77] Elsewhere she described the city as 'the Florence of Dante', though at that very moment it was being brutally modernized with the destruction of the ancient walls, the removal of the medieval quarters and the imposition of modern road systems.[78]

Other members of the community attempted to lay claim to Boccaccio suggesting that theirs was one of the two rural villas described in his 1348 *Decameron.* Ross asserted that Poggio Gherardo was the refuge to which Boccaccio's youths flee, simply because it was one of the few extant fourteenth-century dwellings a few miles from the city. The Anglo-Florentine community colluded in her fantasy as it reinforced their spiritual link with the Middle Ages. In 1898 the reporter from the *Gardener's Chronicle* duly reports that Poggio was Boccaccio's 'palace'.[79] In 1905 Charles Latham reiterates: '[the] old castellated house standing high above the plain', is,

---

[74] F. Trollope, *Italy and the Italians*, London, Richard Bentley, 1842, p. 94/95.
[75] Quest-Ritson, p. 78.
[76] Writing in the vernacular tongue he ensured the adoption Tuscan as the language of the peninsula.
[77] Paget, *Tower*, p 417.
[78] Paget, *The Linings of Life*, Hurst and Blackett, London (probably 1923), p. 136.
[79] *Gardener's Chronicle* 3 Dec 1898, p. 397.

'Boccaccio's palace'.[80] Arthur Bolton echoes the claim in his 1919 update of Latham, as does Origo, who describes Poggio as 'one of the villas to which Boccaccio's youths and ladies had fled from the great plague in 1348.'[81] Significantly Acton makes no reference to Boccaccio when discussing Poggio Gherardo in *Tuscan Villas*.[82]

Today's scholars believe Boccaccio invented an idealized country retreat.[83] If he had been inspired by an extant dwelling, however, the Villa Palmieri nearby had a greater claim, being closer to Florence, more palatial and sited beside the Mensola stream which is mentioned by name in the novel; indeed Gertrude Bell reports that its owner, Lady Crawford, was widely known as 'Lady Boccaccio'.[84] Cartwright managed to satisfy both of the main contenders, recounting: 'while Petrarch was counting his fruit-trees... another Florentine, Boccaccio, was writing those inimitable pages in which he describes the gardens of Poggio Gherardo and Villa Palmieri near his house at Settignano.'[85]

A more muscular link with the Middle Ages was the fourteenth-century English mercenary John Hawkwood. The Essex-born tanner's son was a particular favourite of the expatriate community: Temple Leader wrote a biography of him while Ross championed him as 'the first Anglo-Florentine', overlooking the fact that for much of his career Hawkwood had fought with Pisa against Florence.[86] Though the historical record indicates that Temple Leader's Vincigliata had, indeed, been sacked by Hawkwood, Ross attempted to claim the same distinction for her Poggio Gherardo. The obedient journalist of the *Gardener's Chronicle* duly repeats her claim, as does Ross's grand niece, Beevor, who played soldiers in the castle, 'wondering in excitement mingled with fear whether this would conjure up the ghost of Sir John Hawkwood, who

---

[80] Charles Latham, *The Gardens of Italy*, Vol. II, Country Life, London, 1905, p. 42.
[81] Origo, *Images*, p. 130.
[82] Arthur Bolton, *The Gardens of Italy*, Country Life, London, 1919, p. 292, Origo, p. 130, Acton, p. 11.
[83] In his introduction to the Penguin edition, G.H.McWilliam stresses that the story is an allegory and the settings are not real. *The Decameron*, Penguin, London, 1972, pp xxxi-cli.
[84] 'Not All Gardens of Delights are the Same', Margherita Ciacci, *Of Queens' Gardens*, Sillabe, Livorno, 2004, p. 19.
[85] Cartwright, p. 6.
[86] Beevor, p. 101.

had captured Poggio Gherardo in 1363 with his band of mercenaries'. She adds, 'Aunt Janet was very proud of Sir John. It was almost as if he had been an ancestor; at the very least he provided an ancient precedent for her occupation of Poggio Gherardo.'[87]

Even during the horrors of the Second World War the Anglo-Florentines drew comfort from the medieval image of their city; as Florence withstood German shelling, Acton claimed: 'The Duomo and the fragile-seeming Campanile are as solid as ever, and the bells ring out as in Piero Capponi's time, clear and bold as if in calm defiance of delirious man.'[88]

The Medici and The Rise of the Tuscan Villa

Though Florence remained, theoretically, a republic, the city reached its apex under the benign rule of a single family. In 1434 Cosimo de Medici (1389-1468) – known as Cosimo the Elder – rose from a rich banking family to become the unofficial ruler of the city. Cosimo initiated a period of stability, prosperity and artistic excellence which climaxed under his grandson, Lorenzo the Magnificent (1449-92); indeed as the sixteenth century historian Lodvoci Guicciardini (1521-89) wrote: 'Florence could not have had a better or more delightful tyrant'. Though the family decline began with Lorenzo's death, the Medici continued to dominate for three centuries, consolidating control of Tuscany and reviving the glory of ancient Etruria. [89]

By the mid fifteenth century, the Medici had become the most successful bankers in Europe, investing in loans, currency exchange, commodities and insurance, trading with the Ottoman Empire and the Levant, acting as bankers to Europe's monarchs and tax collectors for the Holy See. They also diversified, exploiting the land itself through mining, farming and porcelain factories, thus creating rural centres in the countryside

[87] Ibid., p. 101.
[88] Acton, *Memoirs of an Aesthete* Hamish Hamilton, London, 1984 (first published: Methuen, 1948), p. 8.
[89] In 1494, inspired by the puritanical Dominican Savonarola – whose public 'bonfires of the vanities' consumed many of the city's masterpieces - the Medici were exiled. Reinstated in 1512, they were unseated in 1527, then seven years later Alessandro de Medici was named the first Duke of Florence. On his assassination in 1537, the role was taken by Lorenzo's grand-nephew Cosimo I who, aligned with the French king, was crowned Grand Duke of Tuscany. Uniting his eldest son, Francesco, with the sister of the Emperor, Joan of Austria, Cosimo established the Medici as one of the great European dynasties.

which had been abandoned since the fall of the Roman Empire. Integral with this process was the development of rural real estate; then, as now, property was seen as a safe, long-term investment and merchant families were quick to buy up land outside the cities.

In the thirteenth century with the rise of individual rights, medieval serfdom was abolished in favour of the *mezzadria*, a system of sharecropping where tenants would work the landlord's estate, exchanging their labour, housing and materials for a percentage of the harvest. As Origo explains, the contracts they used at La Foce in the 1920s were almost identical to those of the fourteenth century, 'even down to the specification of the small customary gifts from each tenant to the landowner of a couple of fowls or a brace of pigeons, or so many dozens of eggs on certain feast days.'[90] From the time of the Romans, Italy's villas were expected to support the landlord's family and retainers, supplying his rural and urban households, while creating a surplus to sell. Surviving until the Second World War, this system bemused the Anglo-Florentine land-owners Ross, Lucas and Origo.

Under the Medici, the concept of the *villeggiatura* was revived, in part, because the expanding population made urban life, particularly in the heat of summer, virtually unbearable. The bubonic plague which ravaged Europe in the middle of the century also drove many people out of the cities. Decimating a third of the population the pestilence ensured greater social mobility for survivors; it also caused a religious crisis which diminished the power of the church. These shifts in religious and social attitudes, plus improvements in travel and trade, engendered a new merchant class. Imitating the ancients, they create a web of villas around the city. As Harold Eberlein loyally proclaimed: 'Villa life was an established institution in Tuscany while Rome was still in a slough of Medieval torpor, and the country around Rome a desert wilderness tenanted chiefly by peasants and infested with banditti or doubtful characters who lurked amidst the ruins of Classical antiquity.'[91]

---

[90] Origo, *Images*, p. 214.
[91] Harold Eberlein, *Villas of Florence and Tuscany*, J.B. Lippincott, Philadelphia, 1922, p. 38.

Humanism and The Early Renaissance Villa: 1350-1500

The crusades of the twelfth century, plus the thirteenth-century conquest of Moorish Spain had unearthed the ancient knowledge hitherto hidden in Islamic libraries. This recovery of classical science, maths, medicine and astrology drew scholars away from religious faith towards human reason. Far from the prescriptive rule of Rome and free of the orthodoxy of the universities, Florence was the first city to really exploit this new knowledge. Adopting pagan symbolism and celebrating the natural world the Florentines initiated the movement which became known as Humanism. Embracing the Roman writers Pliny, Columella, and Virgil, they were quick to promote the ancient culture of the *villeggiatura.*

Not surprisingly it was the Medici who provided the template for modern villa design. The first Medici villas were simply adaptations of fortified dwellings. At Il Trebbio, Cafaggiolo and Careggi [7], Cosimo the Elder's favourite architect, Michelozzo Michelozzi, expressed the confidence of the era by cutting windows into defensive walls and transforming protective ramparts into loggias. Despite his pursuit of lightness and grace, these early villas retained a medieval mass and austerity. Such qualities are evident even in the suburban Villa Medici, Fiesole which Michelozzi built in the mid fifteenth century [8]. Though its Anglo-Florentine owner, Sybil Cutting insisted on retaining later Baroque decorations, many Anglo-Florentines preferred the dramatic simplicity of these early dwellings: Ross's fortress Poggio Gherardo [9], Temple Leader's castle Vincigliata [10], and Paget's turreted Bellosguardo [11] all exhibit an ancient gravity which their owners steadfastly refused to soften. Sitwell even emphasized the medieval atmosphere of his Montegufoni by embellishing the main courtyard with a pyramid of cannon balls [12].

The Renaissance Villa: 1450-1550

In the mid fifteenth century the architect Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472), widely hailed as the father of humanism, interpreted the ideas of the ancients in his *De Re*

Aedificatoria.[92] Based on Vitruvius's *De Architecture* (c 46-30 BC) it is the first architectural treatise of the Renaissance. More interested in the siting of villas than the philosophy of villa life, Alberti recommended placing villas on hilltops to ensure commanding views of farmland, wilderness and distant cities. Stressing harmony with nature, he claimed that a villa should be in an open spot with beautiful views, fresh air, a temperate climate, fertile fields to supply produce, sheltering woods to support game, and streams to provide fish and fresh water. Such elevated spots not only dominated the surrounding territory, symbolically if not actually, but suited the portfolio of his Medici patrons with their hilltop fortresses, farms and hunting lodges which were being adapted to create the new humanist villas.

In an oft quoted letter, written from the Villa Medici in the fifteenth century, the philosopher Poliziano, bids his friend Marsilio Ficino to join him; extolling the shade and breeze, the abundance of water, density of the surrounding woods and the spectacular views, he adds: 'although the district is thickly populated I enjoy that solitude dear to those who have fled from town' thus revealing that even at that early date the region was overbuilt and densely populated.'[93] The prevailing passion for villa life is vividly explained by Alberti, who in his *Del governo della Famiglia*, a treatise on family life, enumerates the joys of the villa which in spring offers 'endless delights – green leaves, flowers, sweet scents, songs of birds – and does her utmost to make you glad and joyous', in autumn provides hope, mirth and gaiety as 'she gives you back twelve for one, for a little toil many barrels of wine... grapes, walnuts, figs, pears, almonds, filberts, pomegranates with sweet and luscious apples and other wholesome fruits', and even in winter she offers the sport of hunting hare, stag and wild boar, as well as supplying oil and wood, vine tendrils, laurel and juniper boughs to furnish a 'fragrant and cheerful' fire. But beyond all these 'what is still better, there you can escape from the noise and tumult of the city, the turmoils of the Piazza and the Palace. O blessed country life, how untold are your joys!'[94]

---

[92] Though completed in the 1450s it was not published until 1485 though its ideas influenced the design of Medici villas for several decades before publication.
[93] Julia Cartwright, *Italian Gardens of the Renaissance*, Smith Elder & Co., London, 1914, p.17.
[94] Ibid., p. 9.

After the death, in 1464, of Cosimo the Elder, his nephew, Lorenzo, introduced elegance to the Florentine villa. At Poggio a Caiano his favourite architect, Antonio da Sangallo (1443-1516), transformed a medieval hunting lodge into a comfortable dwelling very different from the austere retreats of the early humanists. Raising the *piano nobile* onto an arcaded terrace he provided spectacular views of the surrounding countryside; placing a vaulted roof over the central courtyard he created a magnificent salon; linking interior to exterior with a temple-like portico he unified the whole with mouldings, cornices, quoins and window frames, all fashioned from the local gray *pietra serena* stone [13].

The publication, in 1499, of *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* – a mysterious text believed to have been written by the Dominican monk, Francesco Colonna – reveals a growing interest in classical precedent and architectural embellishment. Though presented in the guise of Christian allegory, this esoteric work idealized the pagan culture of the past. Thought to have been inspired by Pliny's Tuscan garden, its several hundred woodcuts depict intricate topiary, labyrinthine parterre designs, complex garden structures, grottoes, niches, statuary and elaborate water works [14].

Written largely in the vulgar Italian of the time, *Hypnerotomachia* was one of the first books to be reproduced by the recently developed printing press. Its influence was profound, not least because it inspired a vogue for topiary – an art form which had intrigued the ancient Romans with its melding of nature and art. Where Pliny recorded whole names and bestiaries carved in box, his Renaissance imitators were more restrained, confining themselves to simple walls and geometric forms. Also copying the ancients, Renaissance garden makers created nymphaea and groves to evoke the water nymphs and woodland dryads of classical antiquity. Despite such embellishments, Tuscany's rocky topography militated against the sprawling gardens of the Veneto to the north, while an absence of water prevented the elaborate hydraulics of such Roman gardens as Villas d'Este, Lante and Farnese. Indeed, throughout its history the Tuscan garden retained a sober, human scale, never straying far from its origins in the medieval

hortus conclusus - that utilitarian space of medicinal herbs, vegetable beds and fruit trees ranged around a central well.

The Baroque Villa (1550-1750)

From the mid sixteenth century the architect Bernardo Buontalenti evolved a new villa template transforming humanist retreats into royal courts. Having served as military engineer for the Medici Grand Dukes Francesco 1 (1541-87) and Ferdinand 1 (1549-1609), Buontalenti renovated the Medici villas of La Magia, Pratolino [15], La Petraia [16], Artimino, L'Ambrogiana [17] and Leppeggi. While retaining the massive rusticated ground floors, he added luxurious new stories to accommodate visiting courtiers. Fynes Moryson, the English traveller writing in 1617, records with some bemusement that the Florentines prefer to entertain in their gardens than their houses: 'They thinke it best to cherish and increase friendship by meetings in Market places and Gardens, but hold the table and bed unfit for conversation, where men should come to eate quickly, and sleepe soundly.'[95] Indeed, Buontalenti also embellished the garden, developing extended pleasure grounds for the amusement of his patrons. Having studied hydraulics during his military training he was able to create elaborate fountains [18], automata and theatrical décor as well as incorporating the exotic new trees, shrubs and bulbs which were pouring into Europe from the newly discovered Americas as well as North Africa and the East.

In 1905 Charles Latham, quoting Burckhardt, claims that the Florentines spent so much on their country residences that their contemporaries looked on them as 'insane'; he also records that within a radius of twenty miles of the city there are said to have been twenty thousand estates, of which eight hundred were palaces whose walls were built of cut stone.'[96] It was these sixteenth-century villas with their elegant façade and elaborate garden, which were favoured by the majority of the Anglo-Florentines. Origo's La Foce [19], Acton's La Pietra [20], Crawford's Il Palmieri [21], Lady Scott's Villa Capponi [22] and even Berenson's I Tatti [23] exhibit the thrusting balconies,

[95] Laura Raison, *Tuscany An Anthology*, Cadogan, London, 1983, p. 217.
[96] Charles Latham, *The Gardens of Italy*, Country Life, London, 1905, introduction.

balustrades, cornices, cartouches, parapets, pediments and pilasters which epitomise the Baroque style.

Decline of the Tuscan Villa

At its apex in the sixteenth century, the Tuscan garden sparked many imitators particularly within the Italian peninsula, but the decline set in almost immediately. By the seventeenth century, Tuscan gardens were adopting elements of the French style, replacing simple geometry with elaborate, 'embroidery' parterres, supplanting the limited palette of evergreens with deciduous trees and lurid exotics from the New World and the Far East.

In 1737 the last Medici died without heir and the Grand Duchy of Tuscany passed to the Austrian House of Lorraine. Guaranteeing freedom of worship to attract Protestant and Jewish craftsmen and merchants, the region drew adventurers seeking refuge in its cosmopolitan community. Among the most illustrious of these was Prince Charles Edward Louis Philip Casimir Stuart - 'Bonnie Prince Charlie', who, after the failure of the1746 Jacobite Uprising, settled in Florence and drank himself to death, providing fodder for generations of Anglo-Florentine writers.

In 1799 Napoleon invaded the Italian peninsula and ruled as Emperor of the Kingdom of Italy. Though his forced abdication in 1814 returned the Grand Duchy of Tuscany to the house of Lorraine, Napoleon's reign fuelled the longing for a unified nation among the various states, duchies and dynasties that made up the Italian peninsula. During the ensuing instability many villas were abandoned as aristocrats felt imperilled in their undefended rural estates. Those who remained tended to follow the taste for the *giardino inglese*, replacing high-maintenance formal gardens with naturalistic parks such as that which engulfed La Pietra when the Actons acquired it in 1904 [24]. Throughout the nineteenth century republican radicals slowly achieved independence; in 1860 Tuscany joined the united Italy; the following year, with the entry of Rome, the United Kingdom of Italy was proclaimed.

An Economical Winter Residence: the Villa in the late Nineteenth Century

It was at this point that the Tuscan villa was rediscovered. As Henry James pointed out, the villas were so numerous that 'you can have a tower and a garden, a chapel and an expanse of thirty windows, for five hundred dollars a year.' Indeed, he wryly speculated that the dramatic sombreness of the villas might stem from their having outlived their original purpose: 'Their extraordinary largeness and massiveness are a satire on their present fate. They were not built with such a thickness of wall and depth of embrasure, such a solidity of staircase and superfluity of stone, simply to afford an economical winter residence to English and American families'[97]

Coming from a 'country house' tradition, most English visitors perceived Florence, primarily, in terms of her villas. In 1818 Shelley noted: 'As we approached Florence, the country became cultivated to a very high degree, the plain was filled with the most beautiful villas, and, as far as the eye could reach, the mountains were covered with them.'[98] Seven years later William Hazlitt evoked 'a city planted in a garden... a brilliant amphitheatre of hill and vale, of buildings, groves and terraces. The circling heights were crowned with sparkling villas.'[99] In *Italian Villas* Wharton quoted an old chronicler: 'the country houses were more splendid than those in the town, and stood so close-set among their olive orchards and vineyards that the traveller thought himself in Florence three leagues before reaching the city.'[100] Today the northern approach to Florence is blighted by the airport, but as late as 1907 Elgood extolled 'the villa-sprinkled landscape and the far-reaching purple mountains'.[101]

For the Anglo-Florentines it was these villas, rather than the city itself, that represented the essence of Florence. Indeed many English commentators were struck by the way the villas harmonised with the landscape. Acton claims that Tuscan buildings seem to grow right from the landscape 'as if in sympathy with the hills and local vegetation'. [102]

---

[97] James, *Italian Hours*, p. 124.
[98] Raison, p. 13.
[99] *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, Vol. 10, ed. P Howe, London, J.M.Dent Ltd., 1932, p. 211.
[100] Wharton, *Italian Villas and their Gardens*, p. 19.
[101] Elgood, p. 107.
[102] Acton, *Villas*, p. 133.

Wharton wrote, more generally, of the Italian ability to adapt the garden to the architecture of the house and to the surrounding countryside: 'the architect looked forth from the terrace of his villa, and saw that... the enclosing landscape was naturally included: the two formed a part of the same composition.'[103] Sitwell posed the Italian garden as the standard against which English gardens failed, being seldom related to their surroundings, often wanting in repose and nearly always in imagination; he asserts that the secret of garden-making is 'only part of the garden lies within the boundary walls...The garden must be considered not as a thing by itself, but as a gallery of foregrounds designed to set off the soft hues of the distance...real beauty is neither in garden nor landscape, but in the relation of both to the individual.'[104]

Since the eighteenth century, gentlemen on the Grand Tour had popularized panoramic views of the city painted from the hill towns of Fiesole and San Domenico to the north and San Miniato and Bellosguardo to the south [25]. In the 1820s Turner created a series of views from San Miniato, in 1845 Ruskin followed suit, perpetuating idea that Florence was merely the focal point of a vast landscape viewed from the surrounding hills.[105] Sica suggests that the dissolution of the medieval walls in the 1860s changed the city's identity, creating new relationships between city and countryside.[106] Although Temple Leader, Lee, Ross and Paget all began their expatriate lives in the heart of the city, by the 1890s, with the ancient walls breached and the medieval quarters destroyed, all had retreated to country villas, lured by what Ouida called 'the art and architecture of a statelier and freer time than ours'.[107] From their hilltop villas, they could imagine themselves the early Renaissance metropolis with its cosmopolitan charm and naïve art, far from the modern industrial city of post-unification Florence.[108]

---

[103] Wharton, *Italian Villas*, p. 7.
[104] Sitwell, p. 26-7.
[105] Garzia Gobbi Sica, 'Florence between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries', *Of Queen's Gardens*, p. 56, fn. 30.
[106] Ibid., p. 47.
[107] Ouida, p. 86.

II. Sources and Inspiration

'Of the garden of Italy, who shall dare to speak critically? Child of tradition, heir by unbroken descent, inheritor of the garden-craft of the whole civilized world. It stands on a pinnacle high above the others, peerless and alone.' John Sedding, *Garden Craft Old and New*, 1891

Before the Anglo-Florentines brought them to public attention the old gardens of Italy were largely ignored by locals and tourists alike. As late as 1898 a journalist for the *Gardener's Chronicle* revealed how little information there was on the subject when he began his piece on Poggio Gherardo: 'I had been lamenting that I could find no gardens in Florence'.[109] At the time Paget, Scott, Temple Leader, Georgina Graham, the Crawfords and William Spence, to name but a few of the Anglo-Florentines, already had mature gardens which would doubtless have been accessible to an enterprising journalist. In her diaries Paget records that in 1872, while she was exploring the Villa Farnese in Caprarola, the custodian mentioned that no visitor had been in twelve years; similarly when she stopped at the Villa Manzi, the guardian couldn't recall the last person to visit – not so surprising when one discovers that the owner was a misanthropic old bachelor and the carriage road stopped three miles from the villa.[110]

By the late nineteenth century, after the turmoil of a century of struggling for independence, most of the villas were in a deplorable state of decay. Sitwell described the general air of desolation and solitude, the melancholy sight of the weed-grown alleys, 'the weary dropping of the fern-fringed fountains, the fluteless Pans, headless nymphs and armless Apollos' attributing to these neglected gardens a beauty which is 'indescribable', before proceeding to attempt to describe several dozen of them in meticulous if loquacious detail.[111]

Scholarly Texts and Ancient Letters

For those who wished to restore or create garden settings for their villas, few books on the subject existed in the late nineteenth century, and none of those were in English. In 1776 the Swedish topographical artist FM Piper produced a survey of Italian gardens

[109] H. Eubank, Poggio Gherardo, *Gardener's Chronicle*, 3 Dec 1898, p. 397.
[110] Paget, *Linings*, p. 205.
[111] Sir George Sitwell, *On the Making of Gardens*, Duckworth, London, 1909, p. 8.

which Geoffrey Jellicoe later dismissed, complaining: 'his Italian plans are unsympathetically drawn, for he lived in a romantic age when such formality was unacceptable.'[112] In 1809 the Frenchmen Charles Percier and Auguste Fontaine wrote a scholarly study of the villas of Rome: *Choix de plus celebres maisons de plaisance de Rome et ses environs*; with its precise etchings and detailed plans this book shaped the nineteenth-century image of Rome, but it was never translated into English [**26**]. Nor was W. P. Tuckerman's 1884 *Die Gartenkunst der Italienischen Renaissance-Zeit* which reproduced many of Percier and Fontaine's plans [**27**].[113]

In her 1912 *The Old Gardens of Italy* Mrs. Aubrey Le Blond provides an extensive bibliography with several German texts on the Baroque, the Renaissance and architecture in general, several French books on horticulture and many Italian books on particular sites. Nonetheless, with her suggestion that relevant books can be found in 'the library of the British Museum, the Ambrosiana Library at Milan, the Uffizi and Marucelliana Libraries at Florence,' she reveals just how arcane the subject was. [114]

There were, however, several sources of information available to English expatriates keen to reproduce Renaissance gardens. Contemporary letters provided details on villa life. The Roman statesman, Pliny the younger, wrote passionately about two of his villas - a winter residence in the Tuscan hills north of Rome and a summer house at Laurentium by the sea. His letters describe lawns, box hedging 'clipped into a thousand shapes', dense cypress avenues, airy rose beds, open meadows and closed garden rooms, marble furniture, statuary, fountains and flowers.[115] Clearly written for

---

[112] Comments on drawings of Italian gardens by FM Piper, Geoffrey Jellicoe, *Garden History*, Vol. 5, No. 3, Winter 1977, p. 78.

[113] With typical English chauvinism, particularly against the French, Jellicoe recounts how his year master at the Architectural Association, LH Buckness, to whom his book on Italian gardens was dedicated, described Percier and Foutaine's plans as 'the somewhat crude drawings of the French architects', GA Jellicoe, *Italian Gardens of the Renaissance*, Academy Editions, London, 1986 (first published 1925), forward.

[114] Aubrey Le Blond, *The Old Gardens of Italy and How to Visit Them*, John Lane, London, 1912, p.vii.

[115] Pliny, *Letters*, 5.6.32, *The Oxford Companion to the Garden*, ed. Patrick Taylor, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006. p. 387.

publication, his letters have had a profound influence on garden design ever since they were rediscovered in the Renaissance.[116]

A thousand years later, the often illegible letters of Cosimo the Elder document the daily routine at Careggi where he lived simply, built modestly and dressed discretely to avoid incurring the envy of the citizens over whom he ruled. Ross, who wrote a biography of the Medici based on such letters, reports that in his final days Cosimo replied to his wife who complained of his extended silences: 'When we go to the villa the preparations for our departure occupy thee for fifteen days, dost thou not understand that I who am leaving this life for the next one, have much to think on.'[117]

Contemporary fiction was another source. Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1348 - first published in English in 1625), was frequently evoked in Anglo-Florentine memoirs, the enchanted rural exile of Boccaccio's protagonists providing a template for the lifestyle as well as the gardens of the expatriate community. Paget describes her upstairs loggia as 'like a bit out of a purified Boccaccio'.[118] Other women in the community - from Lady Crawford through Ross to Mary Berenson - claimed to own one of the villas featured in the novel.[119]

Colonna's more abstruse *Hypterotomachia Poliphilli* provided vivid descriptions of fifteenth-century gardens supplemented with several hundred detailed woodcut illustrations [**14**].[120] Paintings as well as illuminations in breviaries, missals and other books also offered further visual examples of contemporary garden design. Eberlein lists Giotto, Fra Angelico, Ghirlandaio [**28**], Gozzoli [**1**], Pinturicchio, Botticini [**29**], Boccati and Mantegna as some whose works depict gardens. Among the many others he neglected to mention are Biagio d'Antonio whose late fifteenth century *Annunciation* has a clear image of the Villa Medici, Fiesole in the background [**30**]. Guiseppe

[116] Of his nine books of letters published in the 1st century AD, letters 2.17 and 5.6 describe his gardens most fully.
[117] Janet Ross, *Lives of the Early Medici*, Chatto, London, 1910, p. 74.
[118] Paget, *Tower*, p. 417.
[119] Ibid., p. 417.
[120] The community was clearly aware of the *Hypterotomachia*; Geoffrey Scott used one of its illustrations as the inspiration for a bed designed for his friend William Haslam. Calloway, *Baroque Baroque*, p. 40.

Zocchi's 1744 etchings of Florence and its surroundings also offered detailed depictions of many gardens, including Montegufoni [31], Il Palmeraia [33], Gamberaia [33], Careggi [34] and La Pietra [35].

There were also contemporary books which dealt specifically with the subject; Elgood quotes Francesco Bocchi's 1591 guide *Le bellezze della Citta de Firenze*, offering a delightful picture of a terraced urban garden on a street near the Arno:

> There in pots and on espaliers are such delightful greenery and fruits, such as lemons and pomegranates, that although the space is not really large, yet the delight it gives is so great that it appears so. Above this and behind, rising yet higher, is another terrace filled with similar trees... Above, and still further back is yet another terrace, more than thirty cubits from the ground and the view thence is so beautiful that the soul is rejoiced...Water is lifted by ingenious devices from below up to the third-floor garden, so that the moisture when dried up by the heat can be quickly restored. In the lower garden is a beautiful fountain of Carrara marble ornamented with lovely statues.[121]

Alberti's *De re aedificatoria libri X* (finished 1452- printed 1485) and Piero Crescenzi's *Opus Ruralium Commodorum* (1471) both based on the ancients, were also closely studied and frequently cited. The ancients themselves - Pliny, Cato, Varro, Virgil and Columella - wrote treatises on gardening and agriculture, indeed Elgood quotes extensively from Pliny's description of his Tuscan villa.[122]

Touring

The most vivid inspiration inevitably came from the landscape itself. Luhan reports: 'I visited every nook and corner of that landscape...Everybody did. One was always 'visiting': architecture, scenery, palaces, villas, museums and gardens'.[123] Touring was a favourite pastime of the community, as Origo explains: 'the sight of a cypress avenue leading to a fine villa or the mere mention of its existence in a guide-book, was to my mother irresistible.' She goes on to describe how astonished owners would emerge from their villas as Lady Sybil Cutting, swathed in a dust coat, emerged, uninvited from her

---

[121] Elgood, p. 105.
[122] Ibid., p. 4. Elgood also draws on archaeological evidence, recommending that those who are interested in the classical roots of the Renaissance garden study the wall paintings recently discovered at Pompeii and Herculaneum.
[123] Luhan, p. 137.

chauffer-driven Lancia, loftily asserting: 'I know you won't mind us glancing round for a moment – such a delightful façade!'[124] Mortified, the plump, self-conscious schoolgirl would dutifully follow behind, 'carrying Baedeker, the Guide Bleu or Mrs. Wharton's *Italian Villas*.'[125] Sitwell had a similar attitude; his son recounts how his father would wander freely around the grounds of private villas, occasionally encountering an irate guardian or owner: 'It was enough in those days for Henry [his manservant] to explain that his master was an English Signore.'[126]

Though clearly blessed with boldness, the courage required of these intrepid visitors must not be underestimated. Bad roads, bandits and the absence of food or potable water were just a few of the trials that beset the early Anglo-Florentine travellers. Acton reports that in the early nineteenth century the countryside between Rome and Florence was so threaded with brigands that travellers used the Adriatic route between the two cities.[127] Brigands remained rife in rural Italy until unification, and even by the end of the century when Paget walked back from the city to her villa at night she took the precaution of arming herself with a revolver and a couple of dogs; 'for the surroundings of Florence are no longer safe to walk about after dark as they were of yore', she explains before listing the murders, attacks and burglaries which had recently taken place in her neighbourhood. [128] The dangers of travel in the countryside persisted well into the twentieth century; in 1912 Le Blond felt compelled to reassure readers wishing to visit the garden of Caprarola: 'This road used to be dangerous, the Ciminian Forest having for centuries past borne an evil reputation, but now the excursion is an absolutely safe one.'[129]

Even when no longer dangerous, travel was arduous and dirty. Paget recounts how the roads around Florence were 'bad beyond description, the mud was knee deep'; her son

---

[124] Ibid., p. 95.
[125] Ibid., p. 95.
[126] Sitwell, p.xvii.
[127] Acton, *Tuscan Villas*, p. 11.
[128] Paget, *Tower*, p. 395
[129] Le Blond, p. 138.

would return from his daily rides 'a mask of clay instead of his rosy little face.'[130] As automobiles were rare at the turn of the century Wharton explains that most of the sites she wished to visit when writing her *Italian Villas*, could only be reached by 'a combination of slow trains and broken-down horse conveyances'. She recalls 'we seemed to be always rushing through the villas in order not to miss our train, or else, the villas exhaustively inspected, kicking our heels for hours in some musty railway-station.'[131] In an unpublished memoir from that time her travelling companion recounts how their party was assaulted by a family of cackling lunatics at the Villa Lante, while at another villa they faced the spectre of an old lady dying on the sofa.[132]

The development of the automobile made it easier to tour, seeking out venerable villas, discovering forgotten gardens or simply enjoying the beauties of the countryside. Origo describes how Berenson would arrive at the Villa Medici with his picnic-basket and chauffeur, to take her mother driving in the hills; there, all affectations abandoned, he would leap around, exclaiming at 'a fading fresco in some remote little country church, or merely stood in the aromatic woods of cypress and pine, looking at the serene outline of a distant hill: 'Look, a Corot' he would say, or 'a Perugino.'[133]

After a thrilling excursion in an early motor-car with the American Ambassador to Rome, Wharton resolved to buy her own vehicle; 'and so I did – and having a delicate throat, scoured the country in the hottest weather swaddled in a stifling hood with a mica window, till some benefactor of the race invented the wind-screen and made motoring an unmixed joy.'[134] When the machinery was in its infancy, it took considerable courage to embark on such tours; Cecil Pinsent's introduction to Italy was through a motoring holiday with some friends who invited him along to help with the temperamental machinery. As late as 1929, motor transport was viewed with suspicion; Osbert Sitwell recounts the anxiety over a delayed bus bringing visitors from Siena's annual International Festival of Modern Music to dinner at his father's castle

---

[130] Paget, *Linings*, p. 192.
[131] Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, Scribner, New York, 1933, p. 136.
[132] Vivian Russell, *Edith Wharton's Italian Gardens*, Frances Lincoln, London, 1997, p.17.
[133] Origo, *Images*, p.132.
[134] Ibid., p.137.

Montegufoni. 'The drivers of the charabancs continually lost their bearings, and wandered hither and thither for hours over Tuscany in the gloaming...Motor coaches were always dangerous. Perhaps they had fallen over a precipice... or one of the drivers might have had a stroke at the wheel, or perhaps he had run amok...had the two charabancs through some mischance telescoped each other?'[135]

Nonetheless, in the 1920s the aged Lee, having been introduced to the joys of driving by Wharton, traded her pony cart for a small car in which her factotum would transport her round the countryside. She recounts in one of her final essays, 'the odd longing with which those low hills south-west of Siena have always filled me', adding, 'and now, at last, thanks to the modern miracle of motor cars, I have been among those hills'.[136]

Extant Gardens

The ancient villas themselves provided a great source of inspiration, some of which, like the Villa Capponi, retained the outlines of their Renaissance layout, others, like the Villa Campi had remnants of ancient sculpture and architecture. The archives at La Pietra had old plans of the pre-*giardino inglese* garden while one of its ground floor walls contains a fresco of the estate in the eighteenth century [**36**]. Similarly the loggia of the villetta at the Villa Palmieri had a fourteenth-century fresco depicting a section of garden wall, topped with an ornamental vase - a scene probably inspired by the garden itself.

While many of the Anglo-Florentine writers refer to the Boboli Gardens in the heart of the city, probably the greatest inspiration was the Villa Gamberaia in the hilltop village of Settignano just north Florence. Though it does not qualify as an Anglo-Florentine garden, having been owned by a reclusive Serbian princess, the Villa Gamberaia was a perpetual favourite; Jellicoe described it as 'more Italian than the Italians themselves'

[135] Osbert Sitwell, *Tales My Father Taught Me*, Hutchinsons, London, 1962, p. 108.
[136] Vernon Lee, *The Golden Keys*, John Lane, London, 1925, p. 220.

and 'varied with every aspect – playful, stately and simple'.[137] Wharton described it as 'the most perfect example of the art of producing a great effect on a small scale', praising its many features and their careful arrangement for utility as well as interest.[138] Nichols describes it as 'almost unrivalled in its especial appeal to garden-lovers. Time has only mellowed its beauty and no discordant innovations have been allowed to mar its harmonious ensemble.[139] Origo called it 'the most beautiful, and certainly in my eyes the most romantic garden of all'.[140]

Dramatically set in a wooded hillside with distant views of the Duomo and the agricultural fields between, Gamberaia combined, in a modest three and a half acre site, all the features of classic Italian horticulture: a long, cypress-lined approach, an austere Palladian villa, grotto, bowling-green, nymphaeum, bosco, *limonaia* and water garden, all encircled by a balustraded stone wall.

Though the famous water garden is an early twentieth century invention, it fits the exuberant spirit of the place. Probably originally an orchard or vineyard, by the eighteenth century a contemporary estate map shows the space had been redesigned as an elegant scrollwork parterre ending in a *garenna* – an artificial island where rabbits for the table were raised and kept [37]. By the late nineteenth century the parterre had degenerated into a scrubby kitchen garden; Bolton described it as 'a rough and neglected half-vine yard, half kitchen garden, which had been used for many years as a sort of general utility plot.'[141] In the early twentieth century the Princess, with the help of her gardener - father of the modernist landscape designer Pietro Porcinai - transformed this space into an elegant baroque-style parterre with borders of clipped box and lavender. Instead of the traditional gravel or herbs, however, the four beds were filled with huge sheets of water embellished with lilies and animated by simple jet fountains. The circular shape of the earlier rabbit island was echoed in a semi-circular

[137] Jellicoe, p. 50.
[138] Wharton, p. 41.
[139] Nichols, p. 92.
[140] Origo, *Images*, p. 131/ Acton, *Villas*, p. 144.
[141] Bolton, p. 320.

pool at the end, while the whole space was enclosed with an arcaded exedra of clipped cypresses providing tantalising glimpses of Florence and the hills beyond.[142]

Acton describes this space as 'a hall of horizontal mirrors', before praising its serenity, dignity and repose, asserting that nowhere else have liquid and solid been blended with such refinement 'on a scale that is human yet grand without pomposity.'[143] Though he ignores the issue of historical accuracy, Nichols rather fancifully, suggests that the water garden was inspired by those of the Boboli Gardens and Villa Lante.[144] Indeed in their devotion to the garden, English critics seem never to have questioned the integrity of the water parterre, though today it looks more English Edwardian than Tuscan Baroque. Contemporary photographs indicate that in the Princess's time the borders were embellished in a typically Edwardian palette of trailing roses, oleander bushes and basins of cascading geraniums [38]; today a more austere, Modernist monochrome prevails with massive green topiary hemispheres and obelisks rising from the hedging [39].[145]

Despite the theatrical exuberance of the water garden, many Anglo-Florentine visitors were just as taken by the bowling green, a 225 metre long grass terrace at the back of the villa which creates a longitudinal axis, extending the length of the property from the dense woodland nymphaeum at the west end to the open hillside at the other with its magnificent views of the Arno Valley. Le Blond, who describes Gamberaia as the most attractive grounds she knows, enthuses 'the turf is kept as green as if it were in England'.[146] Bolton also extols 'the long bowling green of soft rich turf, an avenue than which noting can be more perfect.'[147] Clearly this feature had a particular appeal for English visitors, not least because it legitimized their love of lawns, indeed Nichols

---

[142] Pietro Porcinai (1910-86) frequently used the semicircular pond and backing cypress exedra in his early landscape designs.
[143] Acton, *Villas*, p. 146.
[144] Nichols, p. 95.
[145] Mariachiara Pozzana, *A Guide to Villa Gamberaia, Edizioni Polistampa*, Florence, 1996, p. 15. The pamphlet explains that in 1924 the property was bought by a German Baroness, Matilda Ledyard Cass von Ketteler who simplified the water parterre, replacing the flowers, columns and roses with the geometric topiary which remains today.
[146] Ibid., p. 88.
[147] Bolton, p. 316.

cites it as proof against the assertion that grass was inappropriate in Italian horticulture: 'covered with turf that somehow gives the impression of being centuries old, disproving the common assertion that grass has no place in Italian pleasure-grounds.'[148]

A transverse axis, about half the length of the bowling green, cuts through the villa, leading from the rustic grotto at the back to the formal terrace at the front; this also links the agricultural hillside above, to the elegant village Settignano descending below. The simple geometric layout of long axis and shorter bisecting axis imposes a logical order on the various elements of the garden, helping to explain its enduring magic through the ages [37]. Throughout the garden, space is carefully manipulated; wide open plazas vie with dense, dark enclosures; magnificent panoramas contrast tightly framed views; clipped greenery echoes carved stone, multiplying the walls, obelisks and colonnades throughout the grounds.

The upper lemon garden with its quadripartite division round a central pool appears to have inspired the lemon gardens Cecil Pinsent created at Le Balze and La Foce, as well as the secret garden he created at the Villa Medici. Another favourite feature is the grotto, accessed by a wrought-iron gate embellished with Florentine lilies. Often described as a *giardino segreto* or secret garden because of its high enclosing walls and delightful *giocci d'aqua* - water games, Acton describes this as 'one of the prettiest open-air boudoirs imaginable.'[149]

In a community which charted its own activities in forensic detail, remarkably little is said about the inhabitants of the villa. Gamberaia had been purchased at turn of twentieth century by the elusive Princess Giovanna Ghyka - sister of Queen Natalie of Serbia, whom Berenson described as 'a narcissistic Rumanian lady who lived mysteriously, in love with herself perhaps and certainly with her growing creation, the garden of Gamberaia'.[150] Origo, more generously, described the Princess as:

---

[148] Nichols, p. 95.
[149] Acton, *Villas*, p. 145.
[150] Russell, p. 127.

> a famous beauty who, from the day that she had lost her looks, had shut herself up in complete retirement with her English [sic] companion, refusing to let anyone see her unveiled face again. Sometimes I was told she would come out of the house at dawn to bathe in the pools of the water-garden, or would pace the long cypress avenue at night – but all I ever saw... was a glimpse of a veiled figure at an upper window.[151]

Miss Florence Blood, Princess Ghyka's American companion, figures in Mary Berenson's diary as an occasional visitor.[152] It is fitting that these two mysterious ladies should end up inhabiting a villa which began, in the fourteenth century, as a convent of Benedictine nuns. Its name, meaning 'the place of the crayfish', derives from a nearby lake where locals went to catch the eponymous *gamberi.* An inscription on the lintel of the villa's front door indicates that the dwelling was built in 1610 by Zanobi di Andrea Capo although the architect is unnamed. Zanobi began the design of the garden, cutting the terraces into the natural slope of the hillside and obtaining permission from his neighbours to make conduits to access water to supply the estate. In 1636 a local widow accused him of stealing her water - apparently the dispute is still unsettled - but Lapi eventually acquired enough water to create the garden which remains, largely intact, to this day.

After Zanopi died the property was passed on to his nephew, Giovanni di Lapi who bankrupted himself expanding the garden; he may well have planted the cypress avenue as Zocchi's 1744 engraving [33] shows the cypresses still separate and only waist high – a far cry from the dense hedge which towers over the approach road today. In 1717 the villa passed into the hands of the Capponi family – whose Villa Capponi south of the city has a similarly lush stretch of lawn. As Vincenzio Capponi (1693-1748) was a noted botanist and a founder member of the Florentine Botanical Academy, he was probably responsible for embellishing the gardens and creating the floral broderie parterre, indicated in the eighteenth century estate map [37], which was later transformed into the water garden. The Capponis sold the villa in 1854 and it changed hands frequently over the next decades. For many years it was let out as summer

---

[151] Origo, *Images,* p. 131.

[152] Nicky Mariano, having befriended Blood's niece at school in Florence, was invited to Sunday afternoon receptions at the villa. Though no mention is made of the Princess, Mariano describes Miss Blood as 'very gracious and welcoming' and 'a dainty small woman in a long velvet dress with a magnificent blue-greyish Angora cat on her lap.' Mariano, p. 3.

lodgings – a dubious fate to which Wharton attributes the almost complete preservation of the garden's baroque design at least until the Princess bought it in 1896.[153]

With its mysterious owners, spectacular setting and unadulterated layout, the Villa Gamberaia was a great inspiration to the Anglo-Florentines. Le Blond informs her readers that 'under no circumstances is it possible to see the garden while the family is in residence, but when they are absent permission may be applied for from the Prince's agent in Florence.'[154] Clearly many took advantage of their absence.

The other great inspiration was Careggi, an ancient Medici villa which was loved as much for its romantic history as its design and planting [34]. Careggi is a palimpsest of Tuscan horticultural evolution from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. The villa missed the Anglo-Florentine make-over as its late-nineteenth-century owner, Francis Joseph Sloane, lacked the horticultural zeal of his compatriots. Though he commissioned an opulent Gothic façade for the medieval church of Santa Croce, Sloan was less interested in restoring his own property, leaving his garden in an anachronistic muddle with eighteenth-century palms fighting nineteenth-century evergreens, amid tree-spotted lawns, ivy covered arbours and grotesque statues, all enclosed in sinewy perimeter paths.

Though the name, originally *Campum Regis* 'camp of kings', points to earlier, Roman, occupation, the Anglo-Florentines were most impressed by Careggi's humanist associations; indeed Acton claims it was 'renowned as the cradle of the Platonic Academy.'[155] Conveniently located a few miles north-west of Florence, Careggi was the favourite of Cosimo the Elder, who, each November 17, would gather Neo-Platonist friends such as Leon Battista Alberti to celebrate Plato's birthday.

---

[153] These chronological details come from the pamphlet *A Guide to the Villa Gamberai*, by Mariachiara Pozzana, Edizioni Polistampa, Florence, 1999, though they are repeated in Acton's *Villas* and other accounts.
[154] Le Blond, p. 87.
[155] Acton, *Villas*, p. 43.

While Acton suggests that Cosimo popularised Neo-Platonism largely to distract the wealthy from politics, clearly the wily Florentine loved both the philosophy and the farming that Neo-Platonism demanded.[156] Like Pliny, he rose early to prune his vines before attending his studies; indeed, one of his final letters, quoted by both Ross and Acton, he writes to Marcillio Ficino, noting: 'Yesterday I arrived at Careggi, not so much with the object of improving my garden as myself.' [157] Nichols quotes further, noting his request that Ficino bring with him 'our Plato's book, *De Summo Bono*. This I suppose you have already translated from the Greek into Latin as you promised. I desire nothing so much as to know the best road to happiness.' She goes on to claim 'and not long afterward, in August 1464, as Plato was being read aloud to him, Cosimo died at his beloved home.'[158]

The fourteenth-century fortified castle was bought by the Medici family in 1417, and in 1433 Cosimo instructed Michelozzi to redesign it in the lighter style of the times. Transforming the tower's battlements into a covered arcade to provide splendid views of the surrounding countryside [7], he also created a graceful loggia overlooking the garden which was planted, according to Masson, in imitation of the ancients, with box, bay, cypress, myrtle, pomegranates, quinces, lavender and scented herbs.[159] Uten's lunette of the villa did not survive, and there is no other contemporary image of the garden, though Vasari, that diligent, not to say obsequious chronicler of his patron's property, mentions gardens, fountains and aviaries, an enclosing wall, an ilex wood surrounding the castle and protective moat and drawbridge.[160]

In the late fifteenth century two side wings, often attributed to Sangallo, were added to the western façade. Several years later much of the Medici art collection was looted by the Arrabbiati, *the enraged*, when they sacked the villa during the 1494 expulsion of the family. Among such works was Verucchio's popular fountain, *Boy with Dolphin*

---

[156] Acton, *Villas*, p. 48.
[157] Ibid., p 48; Ross, *Lives*, p. 73.
[158] Nichols, p. 102.
[159] Georgina Masson, *Italian Gardens*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1961, p. 59.
[160] Cartwright, p. 13.

(1476), which formed the focal point of the garden until it was moved to the Palazzo Vecchio during the uprising.

In 1529 the mob again attempted to burn down the villa, though it was saved by its thick stone walls. Though Allesandro de Medici restored Careggi in the late sixteenth century, the austere fortress could never suit the luxurious taste of the period. When the Lorraine dynasty acquired the Medici properties in the eighteenth century they sold Careggi to Count Vincenzo Orsi, during whose tenancy it probably acquired the polychrome decorations on the outer walls, and perhaps the screening in of the ground floor loggia. In 1845 Lord Holland rented the villa when he was English Minister to the Tuscan Court; his guest, GF Watts, frescoed the salon with an apocryphal scene of courtiers murdering Lorenzo's doctor. While some claim Lorenzo's followers drowned his doctor in the well, believing he had poisoned their master, Acton suggests that doctor went mad with grief and drowned himself.[161] The novelist Elizabeth Sewell noted: 'strange to say, the place is not old and dreary, but as gay with paint and marble as English taste of the present day can make it, only there is something ghastly and ghostly in the memories which haunt it.[162]

In the late 1920s Nichols noted 'The botanic garden, the maze constructed by Duke Alessandro and the statues and fountains erected by him and his predecessors are no longer there. Still the pleasant mansion overlooks box-edged flower-beds and a central fountain that partly carry out the design of the original garden.'[163] Today the garden is a neglected adjunct to a municipal building; though the medieval moat and drawbridge have disappeared, the villa retains the air of a defensive fortress. Vasari's ilex woods remain, surrounded by urban sprawl, and the formal garden, enclosed by an ancient stone wall, is still discernable in the gravel terrace, central basin and several straight avenues. In its present neglect and decrepitude Careggi presents a sobering picture of the likely fate of many other Tuscan villas had the Anglo-Florentines not restored them

[161] Acton, p. 53.
[162] Ibid., p. 53.
[163] Nichols, p. 103.

to such Arcadian splendour that they could be redeployed as academic institutes or tourist enterprises.

Contemporary Books

Though many of the early Anglo-Florentine garden-makers were British, the first contemporary books on the subject were in fact, produced by Americans. Charles Platt's *Italian Gardens* (1894) was the first book on the subject to be published in English, and the first to be directed at an amateur audience. A slim volume of less than one hundred pages and barely one thousand words, Platt's book featured the novel technique of photography.[164] What emerges is Platt's fascination with the relationship between dwelling and landscape. Struck by the integration of interior and exterior space, he observed that the garden was designed as a series of rooms, 'where one might walk about and find a place suitable for the hour of the day and feeling of the moment.'[165] Platt's photographs, however, give a romantic impression of decayed elegance which was to set the tone for the Anglo-Florentine response to Italian gardens [**40**].[166] Despite his preoccupation with the relationship between the various elements Platt's photographs are bitty and incidental, making no attempt to convey the overall layout of the gardens. Indeed, he appears to have neither sketched nor measured the gardens; beyond two ancient prints he includes no plans or illustrations though he did design some elegant cartouches for the chapter titles. The accompanying text is minimal, superficial and often erroneous, and though the book has both an introduction and an index, many of its successors did not.

Also noteworthy is Platt's lack of interest in the history, philosophy or iconography of the gardens, an attitude which shaped the approach of the Anglo-Florentine gardeners to

---

[164] Though it soon became indispensable to the garden writer, photography was in its infancy and the difficulties of the medium should not be underestimated, especially before the invention of flash photography and portable cameras. As late as 1922 Eberlein bemoaned thedifficulty of securing accurate photographs, 'owing to the technical limitations of photography and the fact that the photographer must needs have some appropriate point of vantage on which to plant his camera'. Eberlein, p. 48.

[165] Platt, p16.

[166] Photography is the perfect medium in which to convey their architectural qualities, the mass and void, the light and shadow, the long, enclosed axes and the open elegant terraces.

come.[167] While it is not surprising that Americans, with their puritan frankness and suspicion of subtext, should ignore garden iconography, it is less understandable that the English, with their metaphysical traditions, their love of fiction, heraldry and symbolism, should have displayed so little interest in the meanings of the garden.

Though he went on to become one of America's foremost landscape designers, when he wrote the book Platt was a painter, accompanying his brother who was training as a landscape architect with Frederick Law Olmsted. As the founding father of America's picturesque landscape style Olmsted was suspicious of 'the fine and costly gardening of Italy', though he did encourage his apprentice to 'hunt for beauty in common place and pleasant conditions; rustic terraces, old footpaths ... pergolas and trellises, seats and resting places'.[168] Despite his determination to wean his brother from such rustic tastes, Platt succumbed to their spell, neglecting formal elements of design in favour of the quaint and curious. Repeatedly throughout the book he presents charming vignettes rather than permanent features: overgrown corners, broken steps, crumbling entrances crowded with pots. When his brother drowned in a sailing accident soon after their return, Platt published the account of their journey in a two-part article in *Harper's Magazine*. Republished the following year as *Italian Gardens* the book launched Platt's career as a landscape architect, and promoted the Italianate style in American landscape design. There followed a slew of publications on both side of the ocean. The most influential of these was Edith Wharton's 1904 *Italian Villas and their Gardens.*

Wharton's book was also written, initially, for serialization, having been commissioned by her friend, Richard Gilder, for his *Century Magazine* several years after the success of her first publication *The Decoration of Houses* (1897). Seduced by the garden metaphors in her 1902 novel *The Valley of Decision*, Gilder assumed that Wharton

[167] This attitude was condemned at the time; *Garden and Forest Magazine* complained that Platt celebrates gardens which display 'beauty for its own sake' without 'inner meaning'. Platt, p. 116. In his defence, Platt claims that he was not attempting to produce a treatise on landscape design, simply to illustrate the existing state of the gardens and to indicate the best elements which remain.
[168] Platt, p. 100.

would file poetic descriptions to accompany the fey, symbolist paintings of Maxfield Parrish, the fashionable young artist he hired to illustrate her pieces [41].[169]

Wharton spent the early months of 1903 travelling around northern Italy and her first essay appeared later that year, to be published in book form in 1904.[170] As Wharton went on to become one of the great American novelists, it is hardly surprising that her book is full of erudite allusions from Robert Browning through Shakespeare to John Evelyn and Montaigne.[171] This preoccupation with literary, as opposed to visual or political authorities, suggests one direction the nascent field of garden history could have taken. As the subject was colonized, ultimately, by art historians it has become largely a study of visual experience, though it could just as easily have been perceived in terms of narrative. Despite her own literary bias, Wharton recognized that Italian gardens had little to do with plants and much to do with layout, in particular with perspective. While she fought to include garden plans her publishers refused, indeed fearing her text was already too technical, Gilder begged her to add 'human interest and light anecdotes' – which she, equally, refused.[172]

Though it is inconceivable that she could have been ignorant of Platt's book since her illustrator was Platt's close friend and neighbour, Wharton's introduction mischievously claims 'at least in English there was no serious work on Italian villa and garden architecture'.[173] Unlike Platt, Wharton researched her subject, citing English, French, German and Italian references from as early as the seventeenth century, and including an appendix of architects and designers from the sixteenth. In choosing this historical approach Wharton was undoubtedly inspired by her great friend Vernon Lee. One of the most informed of the Anglo-Florentine essayists and expert in Italian horticulture, Lee traveled around Tuscany with Wharton and introduced her to many of the garden owners. Indeed, Wharton's debt to Lee is implied in the fact that she dedicated the

[169] Parrish's romantic illustrations were wildly inappropriate to Wharton's crisp, scholarly prose.
[170] *The Decoration of Houses*, with Odgen Codman, Jr, 1897.
[171] Wharton, *Italian Villas*, Iv.13; iv.75; 86; 34.
[172] Wharton, *A Backward Glance* ch. 6.3, read on line.
[173] 'The Plan's the Thing', Marie Ingram, *Hortus*, No 20, Winter, 1991, p. 67.

book: 'to Vernon Lee, who, better than anyone else, has understood and interpreted the garden-magic of Italy.'[174]

Recognizing Florence as the birthplace of the Renaissance garden she begins her series with a discussion of the Florentine villa both urban and suburban. While Platt concentrated on the relationship between house and garden, Wharton set out to expose 'the underlying principles' of villa design, naming three crucial considerations: adapting the design of the garden to the architecture of the house, adapting house and garden to the surrounding landscape, and serving the 'requirements of the inmates of the house, in the sense of providing shady walks, sunny bowling-greens, parterres and orchards, all conveniently accessible'.[175] Though garden historians conventionally attribute this concern for the client to the Californian, Thomas Church, whose 1955 *Gardens Are For People* was the bible of the Modernist design, half a century earlier Wharton was extolling the 'essential convenience and livableness of the garden', proclaiming 'the old Italian garden was meant to be lived in –a use to which, at least in America, the modern garden is seldom put.'[176]

Where many later garden writers seemed unable to imagine the gardens in their prime, seduced by the present decrepitude and uninterested in the intended effects, Wharton could extrapolate from the existing state to imagine the garden's original appearance.[177] While rather snooty about the *giocchi* in which the Renaissance delighted – 'humour is the quality which soonest loses its savour, and it is often difficult to understand the grotesque side of the old garden-architecture', she celebrates grottos, noting that today's dry tufa niches would have been a delicious contrast to the glare of the garden when their cool streams gushed over quivering beds of ferns into the marble tanks'.[178]

---

[174] Wharton, *Italian Villas*, frontispiece. Lee's input will be explored in Chapter XVI of this thesis.
[175] Wharton, *Italian Villas*, p. 7.
[176] Ibid., p. 9, 11.
[177] She also understood the context of Italian gardens, having spent a lonely but cosmopolitan childhood travelling in Europe, later recalling: 'long sunlit wanderings on the springy turf of the great Roman villas' and 'the warm scent of the box hedges on the Pincian', Wharton, p.x.
[178] Edith Wharton, *Italian Villas And Their Gardens*, 1st. Pub. The Century Co, 1904, New York, this ed. Da Capo Press, New York, 1988, p. 37.

Despite her lack of training Wharton reveals a professional interest in design, lamenting that modern 'landscapists' have lost the ability to appreciate the subdivision of spaces.[179] Carefully studying each garden, she looks beyond superficial effects to analyze the balance between structure and detail, light open spaces and shady enclosures, straight architectural lines and loose, airy foliage. Unlike Platt, she shows little interest in flora, dismissing flowers as 'a late and infrequent adjunct' and 'a parenthetical grace'.[180] She goes on to explain that the key elements in Italian garden design are: 'marble, water and perennial verdure – and the achievement, by their skilful blending, of a charm independent of the seasons.'[181]

Platt had promoted the Italian style as appropriate for America, 'as there is a great similarity in the character of the landscape in many parts of our country with that of Italy'.[182] Wharton, however, warned against vulgar imitation: 'a marble sarcophagus and a dozen twisted columns will not make an Italian garden'. Instead, she advocated adapting the principles of Italian design to create 'what is far better, a garden as well adapted to its surroundings as were the models that inspired it.' [183]

Wharton never did make a garden in Italy. Her home, The Mount, in Stockbridge Massachusetts, combines an English landscape setting with an Italian sense of design. Her book was popular in both America and Britain – indeed it was the only text which Sitwell acknowledges in his *On The Making Of Gardens* published four years later.[184] In the interim Inigo Triggs' *The Art of Garden Design in Italy* (1906), consisting largely of architectural drawings, reflects Wharton's interest in and architectural design.

Most of the other garden books published before the First World War, however, followed Platt rather than Wharton, being collections of photographs, drawings or paintings accompanied by short, impressionistic essays. Charles Latham's *The Gardens*

[179] Wharton, *Italian Villas*, p. 46.
[180] Ibid., p. 5.
[181] Ibid., p. 5.
[182] Platt, p. 93
[183] Wharton, p. 12.
[184] Janet Ross's 1902 *Florentine Villas* studied Renaissance villas, concentrating more on architecture than horticulture, so Sitwell can be forgiven for ignoring it.

Of Italy (1905) is a prime example. In his entry for the Villa Medici, the most important early Renaissance garden, he is so seduced by legends that, except to extol the views, he utterly ignores the garden, dwelling instead on its humanist inhabitants: Marsilio Ficino, the mystic, philosopher and priest, Poliziano who translated the Greeks and became one of Italy's greatest poets and Pico della Mirandola 'the most brilliant of that brilliant circle'.[185]

Elgood's *Italian Gardens* (1907) continues Platt's approach with romantic watercolours of crumbling statuary and windblown flowers. His painting of the Villa Lante, for example, shows the famous Fountain of the Moors surrounded by colourful poppies and potted geraniums [42].[186] While this may reflect the site when he visited, it shows no attempt to convey the garden as it was intended to be seen. In the accompanying essay Elgood dwells on Cardinal Gambara's personality while totally ignoring the original design or meaning of the garden; indeed he evokes the classical parterre in terms suited to a Surrey cottage, describing this rational, geometric space as a 'flower garden... filled with all sorts of old-fashioned sweet-smelling flowers of the kind endeared to us by the memories of childhood'.[187]

There then followed Sitwell's *On The Making Of Gardens*; though virtually ignored in its time, it survived to become a perennial favourite going into several printings after the author's death. Despite the promising exhortation that 'we must both discover and apply ... the principles which guided the garden-maker of the Renaissance, and must be ready to learn all that science can teach us concerning the laws of artistic presentiment,' Sitwell paid little heed to Renaissance principles or modern science. He did, however, evoke William James' theories of psychology in a confused attempt to explain the effect of gardens on the human psyche.[188] As his son wryly recorded, 'to write a sentence on

[185] Charles Latham, *The Gardens of Italy*, Country Life, London, 1905, p. 97
[186] Elgood, p. 72.
[187] Ibid., p. 73.
[188] Sir George Sitwell, *On The Making Of Gardens*, Duckworth, London 1909; this ed. 1951.

the psychology of garden making, he would read a hundred slightly obsolete technical volumes.'[189]

Like Platt, Latham and Elgood, Sitwell was unable to see beyond the picturesque decay of the present. His essay is an encomium to the overgrown gardens as they stood in the 1890s rather than any attempt to discover their original Renaissance spirit. Of the Villa d'Este he says: 'sleep and forgetfulness brood over the garden, and everywhere from sombre alley and moss-grown stair there rises a faint sweet fragrance of decay.' To the Giusti gardens he ascribes 'a grave and haunting beauty which hardly seems to belong to the existing order of things'. Of Villa Lante he concludes: 'the soul of the garden is in the blue pools which, by some strange wizardry of the artist, to stair and terrace and window throw back the undimmed azure of the Italian sky.'[190] He declares these three the only great gardens of Italy, though he turns his prose to dozens more; each described so lusciously one can almost forgive the absence of objective fact or principle.

Sitwell's essay epitomizes the early Anglo-Florentine attitude; romance and nostalgia replaced any serious effort at historical scholarship.[191] This nostalgia was not confined to eccentric Englishmen, however; even Thomas Church saw in Italy's neglected landscapes 'an underlying beauty, impossible to describe and hard to analyze – a spirit of poetry and imagination which we sense rather than understand.'[192]

The oblivion which greeted Sitwell's book suggests a changing appreciation of Italian horticulture. While melancholic nostalgia infuses the early English perception,

---

[189] Ibid., p. xiii.
[190] Ibid., p. 11-13.
[191] When William Astor purchased Hever Castle, in 1903, he commissioned an Italian garden to display his collection of artefacts - rather as Lorenzo de Medici had done five hundred years before. The highlight was the 'Pompeian Wall' – two hundred yards long, divided into bays to contain the vast stock of Renaissance and Roman statuary he had acquired as American Minister in Rome. Interestingly, the wall's rough surface was carefully planted to suggest decay – the essence, to Edwardian England, of the Italian garden.
[192] Walker & Simon, *Invisible Gardens*, p. 100. As early as 1686 the English traveller Dr G. Burnet wrote of Italian gardens in *Some Letters, containing an Account of what seemed most remarkable In Switzerland, Italy, etc*: 'the gardens are ill maintained. There are none that lay out so much wealth all at once as the Italians on their Palaces and Gardens and that afterwards bestow so little on the preserving of them'. Le Blond p. 102

Wharton pioneered a more rigorous approach to garden history. At the same time the Italianate style was enjoying a vogue in Edwardian England. This was partly in reaction to Victorian vulgarity; it was also, partly, an attempt to re-assert British horticultural supremacy after the eighteenth-century landscape style had gained such popularity that it lost its national association. Seeking an earlier model of British design, such influential designers as Sedding, Blomfield, Triggs, Mawson and Lutyens looked to the English gardens of the seventeenth century, rediscovering, in the process, the Italian horticulture which inspired them. As Ottewill says: 'reacting against the over-elaborate architecture of the times, many fell back on the English Renaissance... [which was] brought back from Italy, acquiring [its] special native quality in the Elizabethan garden.'[193] Ottewill also points out that in his influential 1892 *The Formal Garden in England*, Reginald Blomfield, the major exponent of the new formalism, stressed the distinguished ancestry of the style, pointing out that it stretched back to Alberti and Pliny before him.[194]

Oddly enough one of the most useful, and least acknowledged, books on the subject is Le Blond's *The Old Gardens of Italy: How To Visit Them* (1912). Le Blond had provided the historical background for Triggs' *The Art of Garden Design in Italy,* and though she presents her own text as a mere guide, it is well researched, providing historical background, exploring the architects and sculptors, describing the gardens and offering tips on how to reach them and whom to apply for permission to visit. With the modesty of an amateur who feels her social status might be compromised by this foray into commercial publishing, Le Blond is quick to acknowledge the greater expertise of Platt, Wharton, Elgood, Latham and Triggs; she also deferentially notes the books of three members of the Anglo-Florentine community: Ross, Graham and Sitwell.[195]

---

[193] David Ottewill, *The Edwardian Garden*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1989, p. 10. Elsewhere he adds that the new class of affluent businessmen which arose in late nineteenth-century England sought a grand, historically evocative style, so they too turned to Renaissance Italy, 'the age that first saw the rise of a wealthy, cultured class.' (p. 141)

[194] Ibid., p. 10.

[195] Le Blond, p. 169.

Julia Cartwright's *Italian Gardens of the Renaissance and Other Studies* (1914) was of little interest; a history of the villa-owning families of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries few of the gardens it features existed by the end of the nineteenth century. There was also a spate of amateur garden books such as Graham's *In A Tuscan Garden* (1901) and Lucas' *Our Villa In Italy* (1913) which describe the peculiarities of gardening on foreign soil and quaint local customs.

After the war, interest in the subject blossomed. In 1919 *Country Life* republished Latham's 1905 book; Arthur Bolton who was commissioned to revise the original text, substantially increased the number of photographs and added architectural notes to the original text. This shift in focus from the romantic histories to layout and architecture indicates the academic rigour instituted by Vernon Lee, promoted by Wharton and acted upon by Berenson, Acton, Pinsent and Scott.

In 1922 Harold Eberlein produced *Villas of Florence and Tuscany* concentrating on smaller, little-known gardens which, he felt, showed the true Tuscan spirit.[196] The coloured frontispiece, depicting a walled garden with vines scrambling over crumbling walls and wildflowers creeping through gravel paths, reinforces the image of the Florentine garden as one of picturesque decrepitude. While Eberlein does not expand the understanding of Italian horticulture, he does provide numerous photos, creating a wonderful archive of contemporary images.

In 1924 Luigi Dami became the first Italian to write about the subject, though his large, lavish *The Italian Garden* is more a picture archive than an historical study. Its 351 plates present paintings, prints and photographs accompanied by a brief introduction in which Dami characterised the sixteenth-century Italian garden as one 'made for man ...(and) man, in such a garden is king'.[197] Nature is treated with neither sentimentality nor reverence but a resource 'of which man can dispose as he likes best'.[198] Giorgio

[196] Harold Donaldson Eberlein, *Villas of Florence and Tuscany*, Lipincott, Philadelphia, 1922.
[197] Dami, *The Italian Garden*, Brentano, New York, 1924, p. 21.
[198] Ibid., p. 22.

Galletti, quoting Claudia Lazarro, sees a Fascist influence behind Dami's chilling account.[199]

Blissfully oblivious to the rising tide of Fascism, in 1925 the young English graduate students Geoffrey Jellicoe and John Shepherd produced their *Italian Gardens of the Renaissance*. This examined less than thirty villas, providing brief, unscholarly descriptions and blurry, inaccurate watercolour plans. Its success, running through half a dozen editions over the century, owes more to the popularity of the authors than any merit in this youthful publication.

As late as 1928 Nichols's *Italian Pleasure Gardens* attests to the continuing fascination for the subject. A pioneering American landscape designer, Nichols returned to the scholarly approach, combining historic research with a professional appreciation for details of layout and design. Even Nichols, however, reveals remnants of Sitwell's romanticism. Regretting Enrico Caruso's vulgar 'restoration' of the seventeenth-century garden at Villa Bellosguardo, she compares it with 'pretentious estates of the newly-rich on the Hudson river', complaining, 'to all appearances [it] might have been built yesterday.' She too ignores authentic seventeenth-century taste for crisp lines which would have placed statues clear of any disrupting vegetation, complaining: 'Old gods and goddesses who had been slumbering peacefully for ages past beside murky pools or in mysterious woodlands, sadly awoke to fine everything being put into painfully good order without a particle of sympathy for romantic decadence.'[200]

Since coming to power Mussolini had attempted to rejuvenate Italy's agriculture, and in 1931, on the suggestion of the recently deceased Dami, he mounted an Italian Garden exhibition at the Palazzo Vecchio. A masterpiece of political propaganda the exhibition ignored the role of the Anglo-Florentine community, both in recognizing the significance of Italian horticulture and in rescuing many seminal gardens from oblivion.

---

[199] Quoted by Giorgio Galletti, 'Early Twentieth Century Gardens: Revival or a New Style', Images and Shadows: Anglo-Italian Cross-Fertilisations Conference, Hestercombe Gardens Trust, Cheddon Fitzpaine, Taunton, 17-19 June, 2005.
[200] Nichols, p. 122.

The exhibition's curator, Nello Tarchiani, wrote in the catalogue: 'the exhibition will persuade the public of the supremacy of Italian garden art in timing, quantity and quality. An art which is almost 2000 years old, at least from Imperial Rome to the Florence of the Medici...' In the same catalogue Ugo Ojetti wrote that formal architectural garden: "had its origins in Italy and has been recently acknowledged by the English and the Americans as triumphing over the English landscape garden and the false wild garden..."[201] Though this aggressive triumphalism was unacknowledged by the Anglo-Florentines, the halcyon days of Anglo-Florentine horticulture were already past.

[201] Galletti (2005).

III. Garden Making

The Anglo-Florentines perplexed their neighbours with their horticultural passion, expressed not simply in their devotion to their own gardens, but in their insatiable appetite for garden visiting, al fresco dining and garden parties. Origo's daughter recalls how Origo would spend her mornings in the garden under the wisteria-covered pergola reading to the children and writing letters.[202] Though tea on the lawn was a standard Sunday afternoon practice at the Villa Medici, Beevor recounts a poignant spring day towards the end of the First World War when Sybil Cutting decided to hold a May Day Party in which she, being the youngest girl, was paraded round the garden on a throne, 'before being crowned Queen of the May with a rather uncomfortable coronet of flowers.'[203] Origo describes children's tea parties at I Tatti: 'imaginative plans were made for us: we were bidden to trace the little stream at the foot of the garden, the Mensola, to its source.'[204] More successful was the ball her mother hosted one moonlit June:

> The terrace, where supper was laid on little tables, was lit with Japanese lanterns; the fireflies darted among the wheat in the podere below; the air was heavy with jasmine and roses, and at midnight fireworks from the West terrace soared like jewelled fountains between us and the valley.[205]

Acton also provides a memorable nocturnal description.

> At night when the statues slowly exhaled all the heat-waves they had absorbed, there was a multiple illumination of the atmosphere. You could see the statues breathing. The stars seemed incredibly near, and below the lights of the city spread as from a starfish in long tentacular rays, glowing serpentine along the river and upwards through the mists, climbing along the undulating hillsides and collecting in small coronets here and there, at Fiesole, at San Domenico, and dimly suggesting the more distant Vallombrosa; nearer were the fireflies lighting up stretches of the terrace, half waking it from its dark flower-drugged dream, then letting it sleep on.

---

[202] Origo, *La Foce*, 37.
[203] Beevor, p. 103.
[204] Origo, *Images*, p. 132.
[205] Ibid., p. 161.

Despite such idyllic evocations, the process of garden-making was not easy. The first thing any Anglo-Florentine garden-makers learned was that horticultural knowledge they brought with them from England was virtually useless. Graham complained the Tuscan earth was only suitable for vines and tea roses, warning her readers: 'good garden soil, such as we should take in England as a matter of curse, does not exist out here; indeed many of the gardens are formed of a few feet of earth on a foundation of rock.'[206] Elsewhere she explains: 'The well ordered English garden, beloved of its owners and cultivated by them and their forefathers for generation is not to be met with in Italy.[207]

Luhan, having searched long and hard for an ideal dwelling, describes the typical Florentine villa garden as a place of dreary neglect; she notes the ubiquitous, acrid smell of box that prevails in all gardens, formal or natural, the absence of climbers and the clear space around villa walls to prevent tarantulas and scorpions from hiding within; she observes that the cool, damp north side of the house is always devoid of flowers, containing only box hedges, slippery stone paths and occasionally a meager grass plot with symmetrical pairs of bushes leading to a stone bench 'with greenish fungus creeping about it'. [208] From such unpromising settings the Anglo-Florentine garden was wrought.

Graham is quick to point out that while labour was cheap, fuel was not, and it was the landlord's responsibility to provide the fuel to heat the greenhouses which sheltered the citrus, bulbs and tender exotics through the winter months.[209] For many however the expense was well worth it; Lucas proudly reports how his own modest lean-to glasshouse, heated by flues, produced lilies-of-the-valley, calla lilies, white lilac, freesias and twice weekly plates of asparagus, through January and February.[210]

---

[206] Graham, p. 26.
[207] Ibid., p. 48.
[208] Luhan, p. 137.
[209] Graham, p. 51.
[210] Lucas, p. 139.

Water was also a scarce and valuable commodity; Lucas celebrates his well with its 'precious and never-failing supply of good water'.[211] Beevor reports that the garden took priority during the summer months when water was so precious that there was not even enough left over 'for the odd meager hip-bath', so she and her brother would wash in the local river.[212] Even at an agricultural estate like Ross's Poggio Gherardo which was fortunate enough to have its own well, water was carefully preserved as the gardeners created small mounds around each shrub and plant to concentrate the irrigation.[213] Origo could not begin her garden in earnest till a rich grandmother, appalled at the Spartan conditions of her life, provided the money to draw water from a stream six miles away. The lack of water forced less fortunate gardeners to improvise and Graham triumphantly reports that after much trial and error she has discovered that ivy leafed pelargonium 'withstand any amount of heat and drought'.[214]

Fertilizer was another major expense for the Anglo-Florentine gardener, compounded by the fact that local soil was dry and barren compared to the rich humus of home. Having no stable of her own Graham was forced to purchase manure at considerable expense; indulging in a detailed exploration of this delicate topic, she notes that the local name for fertilizing dung is *pecorino* since it was usually comprised of sheep's droppings brought down from the mountains; she goes on to explain that this was often administered in liquid form to encourage tender shrubs to flower. To minimise the expense of commercial fertilizer Graham made compost from garden refuse, kitchen waste and wood ash, though when she finally convinced the chimney sweep to save the ash for her prized carnations she discovered that a friend simply employed a daily dose of coffee grounds. Graham also complains of the expense of the various different types of earth which had to be purchased for the annual spring re-potting of greenhouse plants, shrubs and trees.[215]

---

[211] Ibid., p. 158.
[212] Beevor, p. 28.
[213] Ibid., p. 113.
[214] Ibid., p. 41.
[215] Graham, p. 51.

Finding competent, reliable gardeners was another constant worry, a problem which was exacerbated, no doubt, by the fact that there often was no common language between employer and employee. As a child visiting the Villa Ombrellino, Origo recalls watching with fascinated horror while Mrs. Keppel shouted '*Bisogna begonia*' – the two words [mis]pronounced to rhyme with each other, as, 'without bending her straight Edwardian back, she firmly prodded her alarmed Tuscan gardener with her long parasol, and then marked with it the precise spots in the beds where she wished the flowers to be planted.'[216] Lucas was rare in the faith he bestowed in his local gardener, claiming: 'I should no more think of importing my English gardener into Italy than bringing an English cook with me.'[217] Luhan was also unusual in her affection for the attentive, 'blue-eyed' Pietro who planted jasmine beneath her bedroom to perfume her dreams.[218]

Gardeners were employed on terms similar to the *mezzadria* used by tenant farmers which dates back to the share-cropping of the Middle Ages. Graham reports that while the owner provided land, plant material and fertilizer it was common for the gardener to work for free in exchange for permission to sell any surplus plants. Another common arrangement was for the gardener to receive a small wage and to divide with the owner profits from the sale of surplus flowers. Ever suspicious of her employees, Graham ensured against cheating by hiring an accountant to estimate the probable yields in the final settlement of the accounts.

Graham also shielded herself from local builders by importing a Scottish architect to oversee the restorations on her villa and the layout of her garden. Many of her compatriots were equally reluctant to trust local contractors; Cecil Pinsent got his big break when Mary Berenson fell out with the Italian architects she'd hired to restore I Tatti. Though the community finally found a designer they could trust in Pinsent, finding skilled builders was still a problem. A novice himself, Pinsent was plagued by incompetent or uncomprehending staff; indeed one of his earliest letters in the I Tatti

---

[216] Origo, *Images*, p. 128.
[217] Lucas, p. 159.
[218] Luhan, p. 143.

archive is an apology to Mary Berenson, explaining that the drawings are delayed because 'the masons are slow and require constant direction'.[219]

Obtaining plants was another trial. Graham reveals that cuttings were a major source of plant material, though she nearly sacrificed her prized lilies through the number of cuttings begged by horticultural friends. Lucas describes how his gardener painstakingly took 1,500 cuttings from ancient shrubs to create low box hedges to surround his flower beds. Imports were of limited use. Origo experimented with English flowers, but after phlox, lupins and delphiniums failed she was delighted to discover that English hollyhocks thrived in the heavy Tuscan soil. Graham recounts her great difficulty in obtaining the Scotch brier roses whose scent she particularly favoured: 'I brought our first roses from a local nurseryman and might as well have thrown the money they cost into the Arno.'[220] Having tried a Belgian firm with little more success she finally discovered the fortunate Monsieur Guillot from Lyon who supplied all her wishes thereafter.

Though she frequently complains about the nurseries, Graham notes that local nurserymen are industrious and hardworking, 'though very unscientific'.[221] She also avers that flowering shrubs were cheap and prevalent 'and many beautiful things are to be had that are only now beginning to be introduced to English gardens.'[222] Further, despite the limitations of climate and soil, the Italians were clearly adept at growing plants in pots. Francesco Bocchi's 1591 guide *Le bellezze della Citta de Firenze*, describes an urban garden in Florence: 'There in pots and on espaliers are such delightful greenery and fruits, such as lemons and pomegranates, that although the space is not really large, yet the delight it gives is so great that it appears so.'[223] Four hundred years later Elgood avers: 'nowhere is pot-culture better understood than in Italy, and, though some plants, like the carnation, succeed better than others, there are few that will not yield to careful management.' He goes on to describe a second floor

[219] CP to MB 10.08.09.
[220] Graham, p. 43.
[221] Ibid., p. 51.
[222] Ibid., p. 39.
[223] Elgood, p. 105.

loggia planted up with woodbine, roses, jasmine, wisteria, azaleas, lilies, hollyhocks, Canterbury-bells, zinnias, marigolds, stocks, sweet-peas, larkspurs and snapdragons - a veritable English cottage garden tumbling from the balustrade 'in untrained profusion'.[224]

Not only had they mastered pot-culture, but Tuscan nurserymen were clearly adept arboriculturists, having developed sophisticated techniques for growing, transporting and transplanting trees, as Luhan reports having got 'cypresses, as large as would bear transplanting' to line her drive at Villa Curonia.[225]

Such cypresses figured prominently in the Anglo-Florentine imagination. When Lucas was fantasizing about the ideal villa, he required: 'a somber cypress, lofty and distinguished, watching like a sentinel over the welfare of the household.'[226] For the young Acton the cypress was an emblem of the whole Tuscan experience; exiled at school in England, 'my exercise books were sprawling with cypresses. And when at long last the term was over, the glimpse of my first cypress quivering with dark yet intimate mystery in the Ligurian sunshine, filled me with an ecstasy like the kiss of the beloved after an age of separation.'[227] Similarly Origo described her desire for one of the early renaissance villas 'which were then almost as much a part of the Tuscan landscape as ... the long cypress avenues which led up to them'. [228] On discovering that the desired cypress avenue was not as ubiquitous they had expected, Arthur Acton, Berenson and Origo herself also planted their own cypress-lined approaches.

Citruses were another perennial favourite; as early as 1455, the Villa Medici is known to have grown such exotics as the bitter citrus *melangoli*, *Aurantium* and *limoncelli* in the primitive lean-to shelters banked against its bastion wall.[229] While Medici moguls delighted in breeding exotic - and erotic - shaped fruits, the Anglo-Florentines were

---

[224] Elgood, p 106.
[225] Luhan, p. 138.
[226] Lucas, p. 15.
[227] Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 35.
[228] Origo, *Images*, p. 199.
[229] Pozzana, p. 82.

attracted by the link with the Greek myths and, by association, the humanists. Lemons were said to be the golden fruit of the Garden of the Hesperides, which Hercules stole and brought to Italy.[230] With such symbolic value to add to their sensuous delights, it is hardly surprising that most Anglo-Florentines aspired to a few potted lemons if not an actual lemon garden. Lucas's small *limonaia* – also known as a *stanzone* or lemon house - sheltered potted citruses from November to April. He recounts how the pots were known by the number of men it took to move them, there being four, six, eight and ten-man pots. He proudly describes his two prized two lemon trees, over a hundred years old, residing in fourteen-man pots.[231] Acton lovingly recalled the sweet scent of orange blossom and gardenia which filled the *limonaia* at La Pietra in his childhood; rather grander than Lucas', the Acton's *limonaia* held over a hundred citrus trees.[232] When Origo began developing her own gardens at La Foce she insisted on a lemon garden for which Pinsent designed an elegant *limonaia* twice as large as the baroque *limonaia* at her mother's Villa Medici.

Being empty through the summer, the *stanzone* were sometimes deployed as impromptu dining rooms [43], although *al fresco* dining is one activity the Anglo-Florentines appear to have re-introduced to the Italian garden. Boccaccio's fourteenth-century protagonists frequently direct their stewards to bring the supper outdoors, and the Villa Lante's famous stone table indicates that Renaissance cardinals dined *al fresco*; by the nineteenth century, however, the practice appears to have fallen from fashion. Lee's Italian visitors frequently remarked on her eccentric habit of dining outdoors beneath a grape-festooned pergola; though the pergola has gone, the rare strawberry grape remains to this day crawling up the side of the villino [44]. Ross, who was Lee's arch-rival, also shaded her dining terrace with a pergola in imitation of Roman mosaics. Origo had to entice her Italian husband onto the terrace where 'we would dine on summer nights, when, just before the harvest, the whole garden would be alight with fireflies and the air heavy with nicotiana and jasmine.'[233]

---

[230] Pozzana, p. 60.
[231] Lucas, p. 140.
[232] Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 11.
[233] Origo, *Images*, p. 253.

Graham, Luhan and Lucas all perplexed their neighbours by placing wicker dining chairs beneath the shade of noble fir trees, that typical 'note of home' which Origo suggests the Anglo-Florentines invariably added to their Italian gardens.[234] While her women guests ate from trays in their bedrooms, Luhan insisted on breakfasting under her rose pergola as the devoted Domenico hovered with strong coffee and steaming milk.[235] She also describes memorable dinners on the gravel terrace beneath an old ilex tree, on a long narrow table, covered with hand-woven cloth, with rush-bottomed chairs and rustic pottery: 'in the twilight, with the flagons of wine and a round loaf at each plate and the blossoms sprinkled here and there, it was like a picture of the Last Supper before the Disciples sat down'. She goes on to describe the large and alarming writer Gertrude Stein, 'spreading through the openings in her chair' and the only slightly less formidable Paget, 'like a fabulous Egyptian cat, green-eyed, with white hair shining under her silver lace.'[236] The free-spirited Paget, however, preferred to take her supper, 'out into the hills or by the riverside, and come back in the warm moonlight.'[237]

Climate was another major factor affecting the gardens; indeed Nichols explained to her readers the Italian garden evolved in a large part as an antidote to the climate:

> One reason why open-air living-rooms became so popular may have been that... during winter... the badly heated apartments indoors, with their massive stone walls and deeply embrasured windows, seem damp and cold; while outside in the garden the air may be warmed by floods of sunshine. In the summer when every blind must be closed as a protection against scorching rays of the sun, no cooling breezes can make their way into the dwelling before nightfall. While the weather is hot, therefore, nothing is more refreshing than to linger beneath the closely woven branches of a dense grove or in the dark recesses of an underground niche where the spray from a fountain tempers the atmosphere.[238]

Many expatriates, seduced by the fantasy of Florence's beneficial climate, found themselves assailed by the region's piercing winter winds and prostrated by its airless, malarial summers. Nichols, noting that Pietro Crescenzi's fourteenth-century *De Agricultura* recommends palms for evergreen adornment, wryly observes: 'even at this early date, long before the hotel-keepers on the Riviera thought of using it to deceive

[234] Ibid., p. 128.
[235] Luhan, p. 172.
[236] Luhan, p. 173.
[237] Paget, *Tower*, p. 329.
[238] Nichols, p. 86.

people as to the mild winter climate there, the tropical palm had begun to find its way to Italy'.[239] More forcefully, Mabel Sharman Crawford cursed: 'Oh poets and novel writers! Great is the responsibility resting on your heads for having fostered the huge illusion which generally prevails with regard to the blessedness of an Italian winter clime.'[240]

Though houses were cheap, they were also gaunt and barren and impossible to heat. Luhan describes the 'unearthly chill' of the high-ceilinged rooms, feebly combated by short black tin stoves known to the English as 'little pigs'.[241] Some, like Lady Scott at Villa Capponi, committed the architectural heresy of glassing in loggias and roofing courtyards to make their villas more weather proof. Similarly, despite freezing storms, blocked roads, frozen water and sparse food supplies, the indomitable Paget passed the winters in her glazed loggia [45], anxiously awaiting the February violets, aconites, gillyflowers and the tiny narcissus which the Italians called *tazzette*. Her diary entry of 31 May 1894 smugly observes: 'In England it snows and freezes, and fires go all day. The rain has made the country look too beautiful here. When I walk in the podere I wade knee-deep through the scarlet poppies, the blue love-in-a-mist and the pink gladioli.'[242]

Though the date of this entry suggests that spring arrives in Northern Europe much earlier now than a century ago, even then Florentine winters were more bitter than their reputation suggested. Indeed Paget berates the Italians for irresponsible tree-felling which left no shelter from the biting *Tramontana* wind; on 3 March 1897, she records 'We had, a week ago after a very soft grey winter, three days of the most terrifically biting *tramontana* with a perfectly blue sky, the reflex of the fearful blizzard which has devastated America and killed such numbers of people'.[243] Elsewhere she expresses the conviction that the increase in winter storms and summer droughts was 'all the

[239] Ibid., p. 56.
[240] Premble, p. 114.
[241] Luhan, p. 102.
[242] Paget, *Tower*, p. 67.
[243] Ibid., p. 295.

consequence of the *déboisement* of the hills. What short-sighted and childish people these Italians are!'[244]

If the Florentine winters were bitter, however, the summers were even worse; the Arno valley creates a natural oven in which the city bakes through July and August. Any expatriates who could afford to avoided the summers. In *Friendship*, Ouida's romantic heroine horrifies a visitor by refusing to quit the city: 'Do you mean to stay here all the summer? My dear, it will try your health. These grand old gardens harbour death you know.'[245] Acton recalled: 'every summer we were wont to travel before the heat became too intense.'[246] Cutting generally took a sea-side villa through the worst of the summer months and Lee would retreat to London, to visit publishers and friends. Ross, who could not afford to travel, observed in August 1918, in a letter to Mary Berenson: 'I hear by various side winds that the poor about here are full of praises of my staying on, while all the other Signore are amusing themselves at the sea or on the hills. Poor things, they don't realize that it is chiefly because of the high prices of hotels.'[247]

The Question of Flowers

Scholarly opinion is divided as to whether the name Florence derives from the *flourishing* nature of the early community or from the Roman general *Florinne* who was killed in a battle against Fiesole. Ignoring this debate, the Anglo-Florentines preferred to attribute the city's name to its floral abundance, referring to their adopted home as 'the City of Flowers', or in Acton's case, 'the sleepy old City of Flowers'.[248] This must have seemed particularly perverse to the locals who, by the nineteenth century, had little interest in flowers *per se*.

In the second century B.C. Cato had advocated planting flowers for garlands, a century later Varro advised planting them simply for the pleasure they bring, and as late as the

[244] Ibid., p. 184.
[245] Ouida, p. 314.
[246] Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 17.
[247] Ross Archives: F.f 1-10 British Institute.
[248] Ross, *Italian Sketches*, p. 92; Acton, *Memoirs of an Aesthete*, p. 148, James, *Italian Sketches*, p. 269.

fourteenth century Boccaccio's protagonists are delighted to discover their host's house 'adorned with seasonable flowers of every description'.[249] Nonetheless, by the nineteenth century flowers were grown in Italy primarily as a commercial crop, and usually for export.[250] By this time most Italians felt cut flowers were unhealthy indoors, so the domestic flower market was limited to wreaths and funeral decorations. As the disgruntled Graham explained to her readers in 1902, 'A Tuscan garden is not a thing of beauty or to be cultivated for pleasure; it is a commercial asset.'[251] Indeed, her bewildered staff could not understand why she would leave her own flowers in the ground 'just for the pleasure of looking at them', while wasting good money buying cut flowers others had grown.[252] Similarly, Lucas describes his difficulty convincing his gardener to grow flowers for their own sake, and not to sell for money. Eventually, however, Lucas was able to supply the English church with 'basketsful, bushels full of flowers – daffodils, carnations, roses and lilies' – weekly from January to May. [253]

Florence-born Acton describes what must have been a common Italian bemusement at the English obsession with flowers, recalling a charity bazaar during his first visit to England:

> the flowers were superb, the lawns like carpets, yet I was disappointed. Evidently flowers alone made a garden in England. This was my first sight of herbaceous borders, a riot of colour which I failed to appreciate: they seemed to be stacked higgledy-piggledy, like counters at a country fair. One wandered beside them, attracted by a lupin here, a lobelia there, feeling more of a bee than a human being. It was appropriate enough for a bazaar, a thing of gaudy shreds and patches, but what would become of it in winter when the bazaar was over? Italian fountains and balustrades were just as beautiful when they were festooned with icicles, and snow accentuated the architectural design, trimming the box hedges and topiary work with ermine and creating a finer contrast for the cypresses and pines. The same snow would transform the English garden into a wilderness.[254]

Similarly, Sitwell's son Osbert explained his father's indifference to flowers: 'he had imbibed the Mediterranean conception, imposed by brightness of climate, that a garden

---

[249] Boccaccio, p. 20.
[250] *Oxford Companion to Gardening*, p. 580.
[251] Graham, p. 49.
[252] Graham, p. 38.
[253] Lucas, p. 161.
[254] Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 25.

is a place of rest and peace, and in no way intended for a display of blossoms.'[255] These views however did not represent the feelings of wider English community for whom a garden generally meant a flower garden.

Though a century ago Wharton shocked the horticultural world with her assertion that flowers were but 'a late and infrequent adjunct... a parenthetical grace', the debate still continues as to the place of flowers in Italian horticulture.[256] Masson believes that Europe's conquest of Constantinople introduced such flowers as tulips, crown imperials, irises, hyacinths, anemones, ranunculi, narcissi and lilies.[257] She attributes the impression that Italian gardens were flowerless to the fact that most accounts date from the eighteenth century or later, by which point flowers had been subsumed in the Renaissance taste for evergreen formality.[258]

Botticelli's paintings attest to the Italian love of flora while Boccaccio's descriptions confirm that flowers feature in the Italian vision of paradise, but these are early sources; as Renaissance design evolved the role of the flower was increasingly supplanted by topiary, sculpture and water. In his 1591 *Le Bellezze della citta di Firoenza,* Bocchi extols a particular garden, claiming: 'wherever a man turns he enjoys the sweet air, full of the perfume of fruit and of flowers which are ever abundant *according to their season.*'[259] While affirming the affection for flowers, this quote reveals that flowers were seasonal, not permanent fixtures, and their place was outdoors, not in vases. Even Wharton understood that the limited use of flowers 'is no doubt partly explained by the difficulty of achieving any but spring flowers in so hot and dry a climate'.[260]

---

[255] Sitwell, xiv.
[256] Wharton, *Italian Villas* p. 5.
[257] Georgina Masson, Italian Flower Collectors' Gardens in Seventeenth Century Italy, *First Dumbarton Oaks Colloquium on The History of Landscape Architecture: The Italian Garden,* ed. David Coffin, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, 1972, p. 63.
[258] Since most floral treatises appeared as botanical rather than horticultural works, thus hiding the role of flowers from garden historians, Masson suggests the modern tendency to interpret 'simples' as herbs and relegate them to the pharmacy is misleading as in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the word applied to ornamental flowers, thus, 'beds and parterres labelled *Giardino dei Semplici* in the seventeenth century engravings were really flower gardens.' Ibid., p. 67.
[259] Elgood, p. 105.
[260] Wharton, *Villas,* p. 5.

IV. Farming

Though farming is an essential element in the classical idea of the villa, the Anglo-Florentines generally had little interest in working the land beyond creating handsome gardens for their newly restored villas. Those, like the Actons, Sitwells or Berensons, whose estates contained arable land, would generally lease the fields to nearby farmers or hire a manager to oversee the agricultural operations. Lucas, Ross and Origo were among the few members of the community to engage in the business of farming.

Traditionally agricultural estates were run on a profit–sharing basis which had its origins in the middle ages. Described as *mezzadria*, or half and half, the land-owner would decide what would be grown, supply and maintain the farm houses and agricultural buildings and provide half the capital for livestock, seed, fertilizer and machinery. The tenant farmer or *contadini* provided the labour, and all profits would be shared equally.[261] Origo explained, 'like many traditional systems handed down from father to son, the *mezzadria* compact is both very complicated and very elastic. There has always been plenty of healthy grumbling on both sides – and in recent times this grumbling has been fomented and formulated by political agitators. Yet certainly the *mezzadria* has suited the nature of the people and the soil; it has worked. The interests of the landowner and farmer are fundamentally the same, and in general their relationship has been a satisfactory one. It is not quite that of landlord and tenant, or certainly that of employer and employee – it is more intimate than the former, friendlier than the latter. It is a partnership.'[262]

Contadini were a major feature of villa life though many Anglo-Florentines had an ambivalent relationship with the peasants on whom they depended. Luhan reveals a

---

[261] The *contadini* were largely responsible for the virtually unaltered appearance of the Tuscan countryside. Luhan noted that even when the old properties were sold to foreigners, the contadini usually passed with the land from owner to owner, continuing to cultivate the fields, woods and orchards in the traditional manner. Despite deplorable modifications wrought by foreigners on villas and gardens, these conservative guardians ensured that the land itself remained unchanged. Indeed, Lucas noted: 'Empires might rise, flourish and decay, but they, good folk, did not gamble in the game of politics... the podere was their kingdom'. Lucas, p 143.

[262] Origo, *War in the Val d'Orcia*, Cape, London, 1947, p. 9.

common paranoia when she recounts that the 'black-browed' Rosita, wife of her gardener, belongs to a secret society 'with members all over Italy who steal things from their *padrone* and send them away to sell'.[263] Paget condemned all contadini as 'short-sighted and childish'.[264] Graham described them as inept and conceited, warning 'the bedrock of the Tuscan character is suspicion'.[265] Origo more ecumenically, damned *contadini* as 'illiterate, stubborn, suspicious and rooted, like countrymen all the world over.'[266]

Acton was unusual in his affection for the *contadini* who lived by the gate at La Pietra; praising their courtesy, wit, and 'picturesque fluency of expression' he asserts, '(they) are the true aristocrats of the Tuscan soil, untainted by Fascism or any other ism'.[267] Such amity however reveals that even the friendliest Anglo-Florentines tended to perceive the local people with more amusement than empathy, viewing them as part of the surrounding pageant. Origo reveals a similar attitude when describing the Florentine nobility:

> The names of the Florentine families whose decorous parties I attended – the Rucellai, Pazzi, Strozzi, Gondi, Ginori,, Frescobaldi, Pandolfini... - had been interwoven into the long tapestry of Florentine history. Some of their houses had been designed by Michelozzo, Alberti or Benedetto da Maiano, or their family chapels frescoed by Ghirlandaio or Filippino Lippi. Their ancestors had been priors under the Commune, merchant princes in the Renaissance, or Liberal country gentlemen in the nineteenth century. For centuries they had ruled and administered their city and cultivated their lands, and some of them were still proud to belong to the great charitable Confraternity of the Misericordia, founded in the thirteenth century... would still pace through the city streets at funerals, bearing lighted torches and intoning prayers.'[268]

Lucas was almost unique in his straightforward appreciation of his tenant whose family had worked the estate for two hundred and fifty years, but because of modern imports suddenly found it impossible to scratch a living from the soil. Although his Enrico had no training, Lucas found him full of peasant wisdom and ingenuity. Even Lucas, however, could not ignore the primitive working methods, noting wryly, 'in Tuscany

---

[263] Luhan, p. 144.
[264] Paget, *Tower*, p. 184.
[265] Graham, p. 18.
[266] Origo, 204.
[267] Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 12.
[268] Origo, *Images*, p. 159.

we still comb the surface of the soil with a hand-plough, sow seed and trust Providence and a fine climate to furnish the crop.'[269]

Lucas goes on to explain that the Italian government – this, a decade before Mussolini – attempted to educate farmers by providing free advice on pruning, viniculture and artificial fertilizers. In 1922 when the Fascists came to power they continued the programme of agricultural development; Origo describes how Mussolini, in an effort to boost agricultural output – not least to offset the sanctions which the west had imposed on his regime - provided landowners with low-interest loans and instituted a massive programme of reforestation and land reclamation.[270]

In small estates the relationship between landowner and tenant farmers was close emotionally as well as physically. The farms were known as *podere*, though, as Acton averred: '"Farm" is a poor equivalent, as it is a vineyard and olive plantation combined.'[271] Ross's Poggio Gherardo contained three *podere* which spread the agricultural equipment between them. The largest of Poggio's farms, situated by the south gate, was leased by a *contadino* with the picturesque name of Adamo Innocenti. In the typical Tuscan manner, the ground floor of his house served as a storeroom with the living quarters on the first floor above. There was also a barn where the wine-making equipment was kept, and a stable housing a few milk cows plus a pair of the statuesque oxen of which the English were so fond [46].[272] All three buildings gave onto a large stone courtyard where maize, pumpkins and melons were left to ripen while tomatoes, peaches and figs dried in the autumn sun. Adamo's brother, Cesare, leased the farm halfway up the hill which housed the *frantoio* or olive press for the estate,

---

[269] Lucas p. 198.
[270] Origo, *Images*, p. 221.
[271] Acton, p. 12.
[272] Beevor ascribes to them 'the dispassionate tranquillity of sacred Indian cows' claiming the peasants regarded them as almost human because of their nine month pregnancies.'(Beevor, p. 123) At La Foce the Origos kept their ox team for decades, ploughing the steeper slopes even after the introduction of tractors. When modern technology rendered the beasts obsolete, many were released to graze on the sea plains; Origo noted, sadly, 'when all those plains too have been handed over to tractors...we shall have to go to zoos to find the kings of the Maremma.' Origo, *Images*, p 208.

while a third farm at the back of the hill appears to have figured little in the seasonal activities.

Recalling her childhood in the 1920s, Beevor recounts that Ross's *contadini* taught her 'the dance of the seasons'. 'One harvest followed another, domestic and wild crops alternating... so that the wise could dry or conserve enough to last until the following the year.'[273] She describes gathering wild garlic and chestnuts, hunting porcini mushrooms with wicker baskets – superior to today's plastic bags which cause them to bruise while preventing their spores from dispersing. She also notes that Italians preferred dogs to pigs for sniffing out the truffles that proliferate in Tuscany's chestnut woods; greedier and less biddable, pigs are apt to gobble the precious fungi before it can be harvested.[274] Autumn was particularly busy with the 'Sunday fusillade' when men would skip Mass to hunt boar, pheasant, rock-doves and 'much smaller birds'– a pastime favoured by the middle classes since few peasants could afford guns.[275] Though Ross herself was partial to bird-shooting, the practice was widely deplored in the English community; Ouida mocks it in her novel *Friendship*, while Lady Paget unsuccessfully petitioned the archbishop to order parish priests to preach against it.[276]

In larger estates, like Origo's La Foce, a more formal relationship prevailed between *contadini* and owner. In such cases life centred on the *fattoria* or home farm - often a rather elegant building adjoining the landowner's house. The psychological as well as the physical heart of the estate, the *fattoria* was where tenants would meet each other and their landlord; it was here that accounts were kept, decisions made and grievances aired. Origo explains that the *fattoria* at La Foce was like a small community, housing the *fattore* or manager, his family and assistants, the granaries and cellars for storing the owner's share of produce, the communal wine and olive presses, the laundry and woodsheds. These ancillary buildings were spread around a central yard where the ox carts would unload the produce from outlying farms. Beyond the central courtyard the

[273] Ibid., p. 33.
[274] Beevor, p. 34.
[275] Ibid., p. 34.
[276] Paget, *Tower*, p. 395.

blacksmith, stables, barns, pig-sties and other less picturesque activities were located, as were such communal amenities as the school, clinic and community centre.[277]

Among Anglo-Florentines who did engage with agriculture, the idealistic Origo set out to restore an ancient estate, to nurture the land and educate the peasants in modern farming methods. Ross was driven less by idealism than the need to finance her life abroad while Lucas farmed as a hobby, retreating each year from the English winters to cultivate his Italian idyll. Though he leased the bulk of his land to a professional, Lucas retained a few acres and planted an olive orchard and a small vineyard simply for fun: 'the pride of drinking the wine, the offspring of your own vineyard!'[278]

While the many writers within the community were inspired by Tuscan rural life, those with first hand experience exploited it to great effect. Ross, Origo and Lucas all lovingly record the seasonal rituals in their books. In her autobiography Origo provides a charming description of the farming year, which, even in the 1930s, appeared virtually unchanged from the images depicted in medieval books of hours.

As Origo describes it, early spring was given over to ploughing, then the sowing of early corn and clover for later fodder. In March and April the lambs were born and later, when they were weaned, the peasant women made chalky pecorino sheep's milk cheese which tasted of wild thyme from the grazing grounds. After haymaking in May, and the June harvesting and threshing of grain, there was little to do in the heat of summer. Farm work continued in earnest with the grape-picking in October, followed by the autumn harvest of wheat and a late sowing of grain. The year culminated in the gathering of olives, the pressing of oil and the winemaking –activities which provoked a quasi-religious delight in the Anglo-Florentine community.[279]

Though she never mentions her own farming activities, Ross's essays are full of rural lore and sensual catalogues. Her expertise is evident in such lyrical passages as this one

---

[277] Origo, *Images*, p. 203.
[278] Lucas, p. 16.
[279] Origo, *Images*, p. 204.

describing a rustic harvest: 'From maple to maple hung long garlands of vines in fantastic shapes, *Buon Amico* or 'good friend', with large loose bunches of purple-blond grapes, *Trebbiano*, brilliant yellow, with the sunny side stained a deep brown, *Uva Grassa*, a dull yellow-green, and the lovely *Occhio di Pernice*, or 'partridge's eye' of a light pink with ruby lines meandering about in every grape, the flavour of which was quite equal to its beauty.'[280]

The vineyard was hallowed by many Anglo-Florentines, indeed, as Lucas claims, 'the very word conjures up visions of ...Arcadian delights.'[281] In practice, however, Tuscan vines required almost constant attention. While lacking the literary allusions which embellish the writings of many in the community, Beevor provides a detailed account of her aunt's oenological activities. In a picturesque conceit, Ross kept her vines wired between pear trees like those depicted in Roman paintings. In early spring the rows between the vines had to be hoed; pruning was done in early May when the danger of frosts was over, the pruned shoots being tied with raffia or switches of pollarded willow while the clippings were collected and dried for kindling. After summer's wind, storms and drought, the approach of the *vendemmia* or grape harvest was marked by the repairing of the casks and vats.[282]

The *vendemmia* was the most picturesque of the annual festivals and its pagan origins appealed to the romantic Anglo-Florentines: 'For how many thousands of years has the procession wound through that valley? Surely long before Christ was born; in the days of Pales and Vertumnus, who knows of what gentle gods of the fields, before the days of Rome or Etruria.'[283]

In the English country house tradition, such agricultural activities provided its proprietors with much amusement. While many Anglo-Florentines took part in the harvest, Osbert Sitwell, constrained perhaps by noble birth or effete constitution, merely

---

[280] Ross, *Old Florence Modern Tuscany*, p. 68.
[281] Lucas, p. 32.
[282] Beevor, p. 167.
[283] Lee, *Genius Loci*, p. 27.

observed: 'We like the short hot days in September (when) the figs and grapes are carried inside the castle inside enormous oval-shaped baskets. During this period the peasants move slowly through the vines picking the grapes and the air is redolent with the smell of the must that seeps out of the vats while the great purple stains on the stone floor show where the grape juice has been spilled.'[284]

Acton similarly celebrates the work in which his only role was spectator, extolling:

> September was the season of its glamour when grapes festooned the whole expanse, dropping to the cracked earth in heavy purple clusters and figs of many kinds oozed beads of ripeness. The contadini were busy at the vintage all day and white oxen stood patiently to bear away the spoil. For the contadini this was the climax of the year, and they gave vent to their joy in songs that were sunshine vocable, hymns to the sun.' [285]

Elsewhere he recalls the annual agony of having to return to school in 'the vintage season, when Florence is most delectable'.[286] And again: 'To enter Tuscany in September is to enter Arcadia. The countryside is dedicated to the vine, and the city is half asleep, the palaces empty.'[287]

Others took a more active role; into her eighties, in a battered straw hat, Ross would oversee the harvest, drafting in friends and visitors as well as the families of her staff [47]. As Beevor describes it, the v*endemmia* was anticipated with much excitement; on the chosen morning in late autumn the workers would gather with boxes and secateurs, wearing hats to keep the earwigs from dropping into their hair and gloves to mitigate the stings of wasps hiding in the vines.[288]

Grapes would be dumped from the individual collecting boxes into large chestnut-wood tubs, called *bigonce*, placed at intervals along the vine-rows. When full, these were loaded onto the heavy farm cart drawn by the long-horned, dark-eyed, oxen [48]. The tubs were unloaded in the cavernous room where young *contadini* would race up

---

[284] Pestelli, p. 158.
[285] Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 12.
[286] Ibid., p. 66.
[287] Ibid., p. 116.
[288] The following description of grape harvesting derives from Beevor, p. 165-174.

ladders, tipping the grapes into huge waiting vats. When the vats were full, the men, having rolled up their trousers and washed their feet in buckets of water, would tramp on the grapes singing as they worked. Despite the danger of intoxication, even of asphyxiation, Ross observed, 'it is an article of faith that the perfume of the must is the best medicine and people bring weakly children to... breathe the fume-laden air.'[289] After the wine had been transferred to barrels, the frugal Tuscans would re-ferment the remaining pulp with water to make a light wine known as *mezzo vino*, while any vine leaves or branches would be gathered as fodder for the cows.[290]

Lunch, set out on impromptu tables consisted of great flasks of wine, bread, tomatoes, oil, salt, salamis and a steaming container of hot stew - beans in a tomato sauce with pinoli was traditional at Poggio, followed by ripe figs. A communal meal in which staff and employer, English and Italian, adults and children all sat together, the harvest lunch, and the dinner which followed, were the high points of Beevor's childhood.[291]

Though less celebrated than the *vendemmia*, the olive harvest was as just important, and for some the olives held just as much romance as the grape. Acton described the groves surrounding La Pietra in biblical terms: 'the olives, pruned like chalices, were centuries old, increasing in fertility with age, and they filled the valley with a silvery smoke.'[292] Though he was apparently oblivious to such practicalities, olive trees were traditionally pruned in a cup shape to enable the sun to penetrate evenly.

Like most olive groves, Ross's were arranged in terraces cut into the hillside; in her case however any flat land was turned over to hay, which, respecting local superstition, would not be harvested before 24 June, the feast day of San Giovanni, patron saint of Florence. Beevor reports that olives were harvested between late November and early January before the wind could cause ripe fruit to drop and bruise. Only tree-picked fruit could be used for virgin oil, though windfalls were used for second pressings. As with

---

[289] Ross, *Old Florence Modern Tuscany*, p. 127.
[290] Beevor., p. 171.
[291] Ibid., p. 122-124.
[292] Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 12.

the *vendemmia*, on the appointed day every able-bodied person would be pressed into service, gathering the olives in half-moon wicker baskets strapped round their waists. These were then dumped into barrels which would be transported from the fields to the press on heavy ox carts.[293]

Tipped in whole, the olives were pressed in a millstone, turned by a donkey or horse, blind-folded to prevent it from getting dizzy.[294] The extracted oil poured through a hole in the floor into a marble basin below. The first pressing was greeted with great excitement as pieces of bread were dipped in to test the quality. Windfalls were used in the second pressing; a third pressing provided oil for soap, and the final pulp – a dark brown cake – was deployed by the frugal Tuscans as fuel or fertilizer. The oil would rest in terracotta urns for several weeks before being distributed, at which point the oil would be stored in cellars, separated from the wine to prevent the flavours from mixing.

Even the smallest estate provided sufficient oil and wine to fulfill the Anglo-Florentine fantasy; Lucas proudly reports that his farm yielded six barrels of oil and one hundred barrels of wine. While less glamorous than the timeless olives or sacred grapes, other produce provided at least one member of the community with a supplementary income. Unlike many of her compatriots who bemoaned Italian cooking and imported their own chefs, Ross accorded local cuisine the same value as any other Tuscan art. She took great care in hiring her cooks, and in 1899 wrote a cookbook, *Leaves From Our Tuscan Kitchen.* The fact that she found an English publisher for what is, in effect, an Italian cookbook, attests to England's fascination with Italy at the time.[295]

Predating by over half a century Elizabeth David's discovery of the Mediterranean, Ross's book is one of the first English cookbooks to present cooking as an art. Her erudite introduction meanders from a medieval recipe for stuffed goose, through Boccaccio's mention of roasted crane, to the proper way to cook peacocks - which is skinned, not plucked, so the cooked bird can be served, re-cloaked in its finery.

---

[293] The following description comes from Beevor, p. 121-124.
[294] Occasionally an ox would be spared; for some reason they did not require a blind-fold p. 123.
[295] Republished 1973 with illustrations and forward by Ross's great grand nephew, Michael Waterfield.

Whether she is describing the various mushrooms found in the Tuscan hills or recording the season for Genoese asparagus, the book reveals a profound knowledge of the local countryside.[296]

While happy to advise on the cooking of vegetables, Ross carefully guarded the secret of her famous vermouth, the making of which she developed into a profitable industry. Exploiting the English passion for the past Ross claimed to have found 'an old Medici recipe'. Beevor reveals that the base of the much-prized vermouth was simply a strong white wine, imported from Sicily as Ross's own wine did not have the requisite fifteen percent alcohol. To this Ross would add sugar, a mixture of three bitters including the wormwood which gives the drink its name, and a secret blend of thirteen herbs marinated in alcohol.[297]

Though Ross made less than a hundred cases a year, her vermouth was renown far beyond the community. Some cases were shipped to England to friends like Hilaire Belloc, others were sold to Florentine wine merchants such as the proprietor of 'Old England' - the shop which specialized in everything for expatriates from Oxford marmalade to tartan rugs. The majority of each year's product, however, was sold through the wine department of London's Army and Navy Stores from whence it nurtured the national Italophilia.

Before leaving the Anglo-Florentine agriculturists, it is worth noting that despite the fact that many villas had been abandoned when the English arrived, Origo records that a noble class of Tuscan landowner which endured:

> Their estates, never neglected, like those of many great land-owners of Southern Italy, but frugally and carefully administered under the master's eye, according to contracts and traditions handed down since the fourteenth century.... Their children were brought up simply and soberly, with strict English nannies... and spent their long summer holidays, monotonous but untrammelled, on their family estates... And when they grew up (with a few exceptions) they married each other and the story began all over again.'[298]

---

[296] Ross, *Leaves From Our Tuscan Kitchen*, p. 87/p. 9.
[297] Beevor, p. 135.
[298] Origo, *Images*, p. 159-60.

VI: The Styles

'Historical revivalism is an integral part of the twentieth – as of the nineteenth –century culture, and its impact on gardens deserves the same respectful attention as the contemporary attempts at modernism.' Brent Elliott.[299]

While it is arbitrary to impose stylistic categories on the Anglo-Florentine gardens, there does seem to be an evolution from the earliest garden-makers, romantic and individualistic pursuing whatever took their fancy, through the middle period of garden-makers who were more scholarly in approach, attempting to create garden settings appropriate to the age and style of their villas, to the later garden makers, who, under Cecil Pinsent, developed a contemporary Italian style which respected classical traditions while expressing the modernist taste for simplicity.

The Romantics

The early Anglo-Florentine gardeners were an amorphous lot, arriving in the 1860s after unification rendered the region safe though still cheap enough to appeal to the impecunious and adventurous. With little shared purpose they scattered across the Florentine hills and created their gardens in isolation. Temple Leader devised the sprawling, pseudo-medieval fantasy of Vincigliata. Ross concentrated on farming, making little effort effort to garden around her austere fortress. Stibbert amassed a horticultural hodge-podge of ancient statuary, relics, architectural salvage and exotic trees all set in an English-style parkland. Paget, enthralled by the work of Edward Burne-Jones, designed a romantic tangle of wild flowers and woodland walks round her medieval Bellosguardo. The Crawfords smothered their fourteenth-century Villa Palmieri with climbers and created Victorian fan-shaped parterres filled with colourful bedding, while Graham, displaying the cultural chauvinism of her class, wrested an English flower garden from her dry Tuscan soil.

If any single style can describe the work of these early Anglo-Florentines it is probably Arts and Crafts. Wendy Hitchmough defines the Arts and Crafts garden as having 'a progressive, almost wild approach to planting, restrained within a clear architectural

[299] Brent Elliott, 'Historical Revivalism in the Twentieth Century', *Garden History*, 28:1 2000, pp 17-31.

structure' while revealing 'a new reverence for nature and her materials'.[300] With their passion for flowers, their informal planting and their active engagement in the process of gardening, the Anglo-Florentines shifted the focus of daily life from the drawing room to the outdoors.[301] This determination to live in harmony with nature was expressed in the structural links they created between villa and garden through loggias, glazed porches, terraces and pergolas.

Although Florence was, famously, the birthplace of the Renaissance, it was the aesthetics of the thirteenth and fourteenth century that appealed to these early Anglo-Florentines.[302] Following the Pre-Raphaelites, they retreated from the mechanization and materialism of the modern world, seeking solace in the naïve pieties of the late Middle Ages. In 1848 John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rosetti and William Holman Hunt formed the Pre-Raphaelites in reaction to the formulaic, academic approach to art which they saw as following Michelangelo and Raphael. This self-styled 'Brotherhood' of avant-garde artists created detailed, domestic paintings and pursued significant – which is to say moral - themes. Scorning what George Eliot dubbed the 'smirking Renaissance Correggiosities', they sought consolation in the simplicity and spontaneity of the past.[303] Though the realists and medievalists soon diverged, their shared passion for beauty and nature stoked the fantasy life of the Anglo-Florentines.

If the Pre-Raphaelites offered a visual inspiration, it was the work of John Ruskin which provided intellectual justification. Reflecting the Victorian preoccupation with religion and self-improvement, Ruskin saw the Gothic as an expression of Christian faith deeming it superior to the pagan humanism of the Renaissance. His 1851 *Mornings in Florence,* with its championing of Tuscan primitives such as Giotto and Fra Angelico,

---

[300] Hitchmough, p. 6.
[301] As an extension of the living space, the Arts and Crafts garden 'fell within the feminine domaine'; Wendy Hitchmough, *Arts and Crafts Gardens*, V&A Publications, London, 2005, p. 10. For the indomitable Anglo-Florentine women, gardening was assertively modern without being vulgarly political.
[302] One of London's most romantic nineteenth century exiles was the Neapolitan Gabriele Rossetti who arrived in 1820 proclaiming the cause of Italian independence. A generation later his son, Dante Gabriele, became a leading exponent of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood; though he promoted aesthetics of the Gothic rather than the politics of Italian unity, the lingering romance of the political struggle must have added glamour to the aesthetic cause.
[303] Pemble, p. 201.

influenced Anglo-Florentine scholars and gardeners alike, and endorsed their preoccupation with the past. As late as 1914 Cartwright quotes Alberti on the simple joys of villa life, then adds, as endorsement, that his sentiments 'are worthy of Ruskin himself'.[304] Ruskin's influence was so widespread that Forster mocks it in his 1908 *A Room with a View* where the young English tourist, Lucy Honeychurch, explores Santa Croce, seeking the works 'that had been most praised by Mr. Ruskin'.[305] In the same novel the odious Reverend Eager champions Giotto, not because of the beauty of his works, but because they were inspired 'by faith in the full fervour of medievalism, before any taint of the Renaissance had appeared'.[306] With his scorn for the moral laxities of humanism, the fictional Eager, like the real-life Ruskin, promoted the rustic strength of the late Middle Ages over the corrupt sensuality of the Renaissance.

Though Forster calls his chapter 'In Santa Croce with No Baedeker' it could equally be titled 'In Santa Croce with No Ruskin' so ubiquitous was the critic's influence on the Anglo-Florentine community. Ross's *Italian Sketches* is full of praise for the pious beauty of Giotto. Paget, dressed in Pre-Raphaelite robes, sent her English visitors to climb Giotto's campanile, explore the Duomo and examine Ghiberti's 'wonderful, beautiful doors'.[307] Even the unscholarly Lucas frequently evokes Fra Angelico while applauding Ruskin for teaching people to see beauty in nature.

Eventually Ruskin's dominance provoked a reaction and rebellious youths began to wrest art from the clutches of religion. In his 1877 essay 'Italy Revisited', Henry James rails against Ruskin's ubiquitous influence, condemning him as 'dry and pedantic', while petulantly asserting, 'there are a great many ways of seeing Florence as there are

---

[304] Cartwright, p. 8.
[305] EM Forster, *A Room With A View*, first pub 1922 Knopf, New York, this edition: New Directions WartimeBooks, Norfolk, Connecticut, p. 43. Forster could not have been unaware that the very façade of Santa Croce was in fact a Victorian invention, commissioned. by Sir Francis Sloane to provide a grand façade to what had hitherto been an austere, though authentic, fourteenth century brick front.
[306] Forster's English tourists, unable to appreciate the countryside without the frame of 'great art', seek the landscapes painted by Alessio Baldovinetti (1425-1499). But while Mr Eager scuttles to find the exact spot where the artist had stood, his unruly party soon succumb to Italy's charms, exchanging received information for sensual pleasure. The hollow at which they alight, 'full of terraced steps and misty olives' with the road curving onto a promontory over the plain, suggests the background in Baldovinetti's *The Virgin In Adoration* now at the Louvre.
[307] Paget, *From My Tower*, p. 63.

of seeing many beautiful and interesting things... we see Florence wherever and whenever we enjoy it.'[308]

Though a more scholarly historicism began to replace the romantic, naivety of the early Anglo-Florentines, even those who later evolved from the Florence of Giotto to that of Raphael retained some vestigial loyalty to the earlier vision. In 1900, to celebrate the Berensons's marriage, Roger Fry painted them a tondo of tempera on wood, titled *Giardino di delizie* **[49]**. This medieval-style garden of delights shows elegant youths conversing round a central fountain in a rose-embowered, flowery mead. A wry depiction of the Berenson's lifestyle, Fry's wedding gift encapsulates the cultural references of the community.[309]

A generation later, when the Fascists were destroying the villa fantasy epitomised by the tondo, Acton evoked, not the glories of ancient Etruria, nor the magnificence of the Renaissance, but this period of nascence: 'From the terraces of La Pietra one could enjoy the illusion of being far from Fascism. Looking directly across the valley to the Villa Palmieri, one could contemplate the site of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, a serene refuge from another kind of plague.'[310]

The Aesthetic Movement and the Rise of the Baroque

By the 1880s Janet Ross and Vernon Lee had become the Scylla and Charybdis of the Anglo-Florentine community. Long-lived and internationally renowned, they reigned over the community from its beginnings in a newly unified nation, to its end in the approach to World War Two. Ever conscious of the ancient precedent to their chosen lifestyles, both women imbued villa life with a sense of history. In a series of meandering essays and scholarly studies they set a new tone for the community. Eschewing the fey medievalism of their predecessors, they combined literature, history, scholarship and horticulture to create an atmosphere which enticed intellectuals,

---

[308] James, *Italian Hours*, p. 125.
[309] Margherita Ciacci's article 'Not all gardens of delights are the same', drew my attention to this tondo. *Queen's Gardens*, p. 27.
[310] Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 388.

aesthetes and scholars. While Ross concentrated on the classical ideal, recreating a Virgilian idyll in her agricultural estate and exploring ancient farming customs in her essays, Lee focussed on the Baroque. An early student of Walter Pater, she re-discovered the bold sensuous curves of the style through the lens of his Aesthetic Movement.

In 1865, during his first visit to Italy, Pater began forming the philosophy which was to supplant Ruskin's moralistic approach. Studying the poetry of Michelangelo and the art of Leonardo inspired him to seek aesthetic as opposed to ethical virtues; soon he was promoting texture, movement and composition as the sole criteria for judging art. His earliest essays, published as *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) fed a *fin de siècle* hedonism which saw enjoyment, rather than edification, as the purpose of art.[311] Pater's understanding of the Renaissance stretched from pre-Boccaccio French *fabliaux* through the atelier of Giorgione to conclude with an essay on the eighteenth-century historian Johann Winckelman. In his 1905 *Seven Angels of the Renascence* (sic), Sir Wyke Bayliss, President of the Royal Society of British Artists, reveals a similar imprecision, encompassing Cimabue and Velasquez with the claim: 'The Renascence is that great revival of Art which culminated in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It had its beginning in the thirteenth and lapsed in the seventeenth.'[312] The Anglo-Florentines adopted a similarly catholic approach, using the terms Renaissance and Baroque almost interchangeably. Geoffrey Scott asserts the continuity between the

---

[311] The concept of the renaissance is, in fact a Florentine invention. So too is the concept of the Dark or Middle ages between the Roman civilization and its Florentine rebirth a thousand years later. Giorgio Vasari, in his 1550 *Lives of the Artists*, first posited the theory that art was 'reborn' in fourteenth century Florence having peaked with the Roman Empire, then declined with the barbarian invaders and their Christian successors, only to be reborn in his native Tuscany under the Medici. Though Vasari's approach shaped the study of European history, the word 'renaissance' was in fact coined by the nineteenth century French historian Jules Michelet, who used it as the title for his 1855 study of sixteenth century France, *La Renaissance*. Five years later in his seminal *The Civilization of the Renaissance In Italy*, the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt adopted the term to describe the period in Italian culture from 1300-1550 when the rediscovery of ancient ideas stimulated arts, politics and commerce (published in English in 1878). That same year Charles Eliot Norton's *Notes of Travel and Study in Italy* introduced less academic Americans to the art and culture of Renaissance Italy.

[312] Bayliss, p. v.

two styles, claiming: 'the insatiate curiosity, the haste, the short duration of styles; hence the conversion of classic forms to gay uses of baroque and rococo invention.'[313]

Despite its vagaries, Pater's study incited a generation with such novel assertions as: 'Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end' and 'To burn always with this gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy is success in life', and its final exhortation: 'Of this wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art's sake, has most; for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake.'[314] The sense of impending death within this sentiment, the suggestion that mortality is a precondition of beauty, promoted a morbid concentration on decay and corruption. Osbert Sitwell claimed his father's *On The Making of Gardens* was inspired by 'those crepuscular sensations made fashionable by Maeterlinck, together with a reverberation of the august, if far-fetched rotundities of Walter Pater.'[315] Pater's appeal was not confined to melancholic eccentrics however, as evidenced by Vernon Lee.

Lee's importance in stimulating appreciation for the Baroque, particularly in the field of horticulture, should not be underestimated. Her essay, 'In Praise of Old Italian Gardens' asserts 'the happiest manifestations of the Baroque spirit are to be seen in the field of garden architecture'.[316] Though Lee's 1880 *Studies of the Eighteenth Century In Italy* virtually introduced the Baroque to the English middle classes, today Scott is usually credited with having discovered the style. Despite his reluctance to grant Lee her full due, Scott's biographer does admit his subject was stimulated by conversations with 'Bernard Berenson and Vernon Lee' – granting Lee the same prominence as the great Berenson.[317] As late as 1928, Nichols makes no reference to Scott at all but asserts: 'Vernon Lee, many years ago, was one of the first art experts to appreciate the

[313] Scott, p. 28.
[314] Pater, *The Renaissance*, pp. 246-248.
[315] Sitwell, p.xiv.
[316] Ibid, p.158.
[317] Fantoni, p. 43.

value of [the baroque] at a time when most critics harped only on "[its] vulgarity and decadence"'.[318]

In his novel *These Barren Leaves* Huxley ridicules the Anglo-Florentine resistance to the Baroque as his English intellectual excoriates the style: 'It gesticulates rhetorically... it sobs and bawls in its efforts to show you how passionate it is... one can't feel emotion about anything so furiously and consciously emotional as these baroque things.'[319] As late as 1904 Wharton reveals the continuing aversion to the style, when she praises the Boboli's amphitheatre, as 'pure Renaissance, without trace of the heavy and fantastic *barrochismo* which, half a century later began to disfigure such compositions in the villas near Rome.'[320]

Through the early twentieth century Michelangelo replaced Giotto as the preferred artist of the community. One of the key events in Huxley's novel is the excursion his Anglo-Florentines make to the Carrara hills to view the quarries from which the master acquired his marble.[321] By this time Arthur Acton, Berenson and Sitwell were refining the focus of the Anglo-Florentine garden. Moving from the vague, floral, romanticism of the early community, they took a more academic approach to horticulture and villa life. Harold Acton, recalling the Florence of his childhood notes: 'the Guelphs and Ghibellines had been replaced by rival schools of art-historians. Between Berenson, Horne, Loeser and Perkins one never knew what fresh crisis had arisen' adding, that 'it made a difficult time for hostesses.'[322] Similarly William Rothenstein asserts: 'there were armed camps and fierce rivalries in Florence then, as in past times; but the fighting

---

[318] Nichols, p. 158.
[319] Huxley, p. 206-7.
[320] Ibid., p. 29
[321] Huxley, p. 166. Harold Acton reveals that this taste for classicism extended into art and music as well, when he recalls 'In Florence I had enjoyed some of the finest Cezannes in Charles Loeser's music room... while the Lener Quartet played Haydn and Mozart.'(Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 90) He demonstrates the shift from medieval piety to fin-de-siècle decadence in his own experience, admitting to an early infatuation with the paintings of Cimabue and Giotto whose 'strength', 'swiftness' and grace' enchanted. the precocious aesthete, much as the fate of 'Dante and Beatrice' shaped. his sexual fantasies. As he grew older he sought out the work of Bakst and Aubrey Beardsley, whose 'purity of line and pattern' transposed. into black and white designs the 'overripe metaphors and delirious interjections' of Edgar Allen Poe, who had supplanted Dante in his imagination. (*Memoirs*, p. 22/24)
[322] Ibid., p. 9.

was far less bloody, concerned as it was with attributions rather than with Ducal thrones. Berenson, Horne, Loeser, Vernon Lee, Maud Crutwell, all had their mercenaries – and their artilleries.'[323]

Rather than importing horticultural styles and plant materials from England, they rooted their gardens in the Tuscan vernacular. As most of their villas had been built or embellished in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the baroque was the obvious style to adopt. Following Lee's lead, Sitwell researched Italian gardens. While denouncing him as a tyrant, a skinflint and a baboon, his offspring absorbed his influence. In 1924 Sacheverell published *Southern Baroque Art*, hailed as a 'handbook and cultural icon' for the aesthetes of the twenties; through the next three decades the younger Sitwells promoted the style so vehemently that many forgot that it was neither 'the invention' nor 'the sole prerogative of the trio.'[324] In fact, Sitwell's garden reveals as much medieval fantasy as baroque horticulture but his writing promoted the baroque style and his medievalism had a baroque flourish.

Cecil Pinsent (1884-1963) and the Modern Tuscan Style

Though he never even owned a garden, the person who shaped Anglo-Florentine horticulture was Cecil Ross Pinsent. In a 1910 article in *Country Life* H. Avary Tipping deplored the fact that contemporary architects working on the Riviera ignored the vernacular, noting few 'have drunk in the feeling of the rocky hillsides, of the terraced olive groves, have had in their minds the gardens of Italy or have sought to link these characteristics of Nature and of the past with what is best in the immense new resources of garden material and most intelligent in their display and arrangement'.[325] Pinsent was to do all this, fulfilling his client's wishes while respecting the history of the villa, exploiting the features of the site and adapting to the surrounding countryside.

In recent years, with the growing interest in garden history, Pinsent has gained renown as a garden designer; ironically he barely acknowledged his own horticultural

---

[323] Sprigge, p. 201.
[324] Stephen Calloway, *Baroque Baroque*, Phaidon, London, 1994, p. 47;35.
[325] H. Avary Tipping, Villa Sylvia, *Country Life*, 16 July 1910, p. 90.

accomplishments, listing *Gardens* after *Decoration* and second only to *Schemes Not Carried Out* in the record of his works he drew up towards the end of his life.[326] A modest, self-effacing man, Pinsent is an enigma in this egotistical community. As the De Montford University team who produced a report on Pinsent's work at Le Balze describe it, 'Pinsent is known to have thrown away almost every sketch he produced, and a faithful picture of his ideas and working methods is therefore difficult to construct.'[327]

Pinsent was born in Montevideo where his father was involved in the railways. In 1892 the family returned to England, settling in the London suburb of Hampstead. After prep school in Hampshire, Pinsent attended Marlborough College, which he left at the age of sixteen on the death of his mother. Despite family pressure to attend Cambridge University, Pinsent determined to study architecture, enrolling, in 1901 at the Architectural Association. Three years later he won the Architectural Union prize and used the funds to finance a walking holiday in Switzerland, though earlier travels with his father had introduced him to European architecture.

In 1905 Pinsent was accepted at the Royal Academy School of Architecture where the Professor of Architecture was Reginald Blomfield, a leading exponent of formalism and the author of the influential *The Formal Garden In England* (1892). Also on staff was CFA Voysey, who, despite his links with Gothic Revivalism, was famed for the elegance and simplicity of his designs as well as his respect for vernacular traditions and materials – all qualities which would feature in Pinsent's mature work.

In his final year, 1906, Pinsent won the Bannister Fletcher Bursary, which he used to finance his first trip to Italy. In this adventure Pinsent was encouraged by his friends Edmund and Mary Houghton, to whose niece, Alice, he was briefly engaged.[328]

---

[326] Fantoni (ed.), *Cecil Pinsent and his Gardens in Tuscany*, papers from the Symposium, Fiesole 22 June 1995, Georgetown University, pub: Edizioni Firenze, Florence, 1995, pp 60-66.
[327] Shacklock & Mason, 'A Twentieth Century Garden,' *Garden History* 23:1, p. 121.
[328] Scott's biographer Richard Dunn claims Mary Houghton broke the engagement to secure Pinsent for herself. Though he had brief affairs with other women Pinsent was essentially a loner, unlike his partner Geoffrey Scott. Fantoni (1995) p. 35.

Members of the group of aesthetes known as the Souls, the Houghtons were keen photographers and early automobile enthusiasts, employing Pinsent as a driver for an Italian motor tour they took during the autumn of 1906.[329]

On Houghton's death Pinsent wrote to Berenson, describing their mutual friend as 'the first person, after a stuffy and strict upbringing, to open windows onto new horizons for me.' He went on: 'I shall never forget his fetching me off the Palazzo Nonfinito, which in my innocence I was measuring, and telling me to go and measure the Pazzi Chapel first, and come back to the Nonfinito if I felt like it after. I never did.'[330] This recollection gives a valuable insight into to Pinsent's own aesthetic, describing his shift from the mannerist distortions of the later Baroque to the simple, human-scaled work of the early Renaissance.

Soon after returning from their motor tour Houghton introduced Pinsent to Bernard Berenson for whom he frequently photographed art and architecture. On that encounter Mary Berenson described Pinsent as 'nice but not very exciting' while Nicky Mariano, Berenson's secretary, found him 'rather cold and impersonal'.[331] Pinsent's early dullness may have stemmed from shyness, intellectual inhibition or from wry amusement at the intellectual pretensions of his hosts. Mariano later acknowledged that Berenson enjoyed Pinsent's 'quiet impersonal manner, his excellent mind, the variety of his interests.'[332]. Indeed his letters to Berenson record such varied readings as Ronald Knox's translation of the Old Testament, Malraux's *Psychologie de l'Art,* Albert Heim's *Geologie der Schweiz* and Fosco Maraini's *Segreto Tibeto.*

In 1907 Pinsent returned to London to finish his studies, and in1908 he designed one of his few English projects, a small house and garden for Edmund's sister Jane Houghton.

---

[329] Jellicoe described Edmund as 'a true aesthete, unworldly, a perfect example of a dilettante with no creative talent of his own but capable of recognizing the creativity of others.' Ethne Clarke, 'A Biography of Cecil Ross Pinsent', *Garden History* 26:2, Winter 1998, p. 180. Mariano described. him as 'the most endearing type of English loafer, utterly disinterested, with good taste in decoration and furniture, taking up one hobby after the other'. Mariano, p. 30.
[330] CP to BB, 7.9.53, I Tatti Archives.
[331] Ibid, p. 180; Mariano, p. 7.
[332] Mariano, p. 7.

Located at 20 St Anthony's Road Bournemouth, the house, now Grade 2 listed, is described as a picturesque, neo-Georgian villa. Though the garden was lost in subsequent development, an early photograph shows a simple, symmetrical space, sunk to provide greater intimacy and bounded by clipped hedges, creating the sense of enclosure which would become a hallmark of Pinsent's gardens.[333] All the living rooms lead onto the garden, focusing on a lily pond which stretches the length of the house and mimics the bowed curve of the central loggia. A narrow bed abutting the house provides the only planting space – an early indication of Pinsent's lifelong indifference to flowers. Despite its simplicity, however, the garden seems fussy and claustrophobic, with none of the austere elegance of Pinsent's later designs.

In 1909 Pinsent was back in Italy where Mary Berenson, having quarrelled with her Italian architects, persuaded him to join forces with her current protégé, Geoffrey Scott (1883-1929) and take over the restoration of I Tatti. This commission was to establish Pinsent's career. Since many of the Anglo-Florentines were unable or unwilling to deal with local builders, Pinsent provided an ideal intermediary, interpreting and adapting his clients' ideas to the materials and talent available. As one friend passed him on to another Pinsent soon became the architect of choice to the Anglo-Florentine community.

Described as a pioneer of the 'palazzo style' Pinsent worked on many of the twentieth-century Anglo-Florentine villas, stripping away unsympathetic accretions, discretely inserting modern conveniences and creating appropriate garden surrounds.[334] While Scott absorbed the ideas floating around the community and codified them into *The Architecture of Humanism,* Pinsent developed a new approach to villa design; indeed his real achievement was the creation of a modern Tuscan style.

In 1911 Berenson's mistress Sybil Cutting commissioned the partnership to modernise her Villa Medici; in 1913 Berenson's Harvard friend, Charles Strong, commissioned

[333] Clarke, p. 182.
[334] Calloway, p. 39.

them to design a villa on a steep hillside, and in 1924 Cutting's newly married daughter, Iris Origo, commissioned Pinsent - then working alone - to help develop her estate in the Val d'Orcia. Though he had many smaller commissions over the years, these projects form the bulk of Pinsent's oeuvre and through them he evolved his own, unique horticultural style.

Though Acton noted 'their names were always linked like Chatto and Windus', Scott's contribution to the partnership has always been unclear.[335] A talented writer and architectural critic, Scott appears to have offered little more than charm.[336] As an Oxford undergraduate he had won the prestigious Newdigate Poetry Prize, and though he graduated in 1907 with a disappointing second class degree, the following year he won the coveted Chancellor's Prize for an essay on 'The National Character of English Architecture'. In 1906 Mary Berenson had invited Scott and Maynard Keynes to I Tatti as companions for her daughters. Though Keynes was initially shocked at Scott's cultivated air of decadence, the two men became friends and probably intimates.[337] William Rothenstein, who was painting a portrait of Berenson at the time, described Scott as 'dark-eyed and pale, he looked strikingly like a Botticelli portrait' adding, 'he was the most inspiring and entertaining of guests...his talk at the Berensons' was something to be remembered'.[338] Mary became infatuated and convinced her husband to hire Scott as a secretary. Plagued by the need to find a career, Scott enrolled at London's Architectural Association but endured only one term before boredom drove him back to Florence, where, despite his lack of qualifications, Mary convinced Pinsent to take him on as a partner.

Ethne Clarke probably comes closest to defining Scott's role when she posits that he acted in an advisory capacity, 'helping to select furnishings and fittings'.[339] John

---

[335] Watkin, xii.
[336] Though Scott had little if any involvement in the design of the gardens, he was linked with the major horticultural figures of the day; in the 1920s he had an affair with Vita Sackville West. Meanwhile the proofs of his book were corrected by Francis Jekyll, Gertrude Jekyll's nephew and biographer.
[337] Scott, *The Architecture of Humanism*, The Architectural Press, London, 1914, (this ed, 1980; foreword by David Watkin), p.x,
[338] Ibid., p.xi.
[339] Clarke, G.H., p. 183.

Dixon Hunt also describes Scott as Pinsent's 'aesthetic adviser'.[340] Indeed, recalling her introduction to Scott, Mariano reveals: 'he was looking after the decoration and furniture of various new rooms at I Tatti'.[341] Despite such evidence, Scott is still widely described as 'an architect', and he is often credited with shaping Pinsent's views on design. Donata Mazzini expresses the common (mis)perception, when she recounts of the Villa Medici: 'It seems likely that the ideas were in fact mostly Scott's but the major changes are attributed to Pinsent'.[342]

Similarly, while acknowledging that Pinsent produced the plans of Le Balze and supervised the work, Vincent Shacklock claims that Scott's 'intellectual contribution can hardly be over-estimated', though he offers no evidence as to what that contribution was.[343] Mariano confirms that Pinsent was the major, if not the sole force behind Le Balze, when she introduces its owner as, 'Charles Augustus Strong, for whom Cecil Pinsent had built the Villa delle Balze'.[344] Nonetheless, when describing La Foce, Giorgio Galletti also assumes that Pinsent was merely carrying out Scott's ideas: 'what has been accused of as pastiche is in fact the result of a coherent aesthetic theory which Scott elaborated and Pinsent applied'.[345] In private conversation Galletti continued to maintain that Pinsent was influenced by Scott, since Scott was the intellectual and Pinsent 'a mere architect'.[346]

Alan Grieco, senior lecturer at I Tatti, points out that this attitude reflects a common bias towards intellectual rather than practical achievements among academics.[347] Indeed, since garden history has been shaped by academics rather than practicing designers, it is understandable that Scott should be credited for Pinsent's genius. Furthermore, while Pinsent remained, essentially, an employee of the community, Scott

---

[340] John Dixon Hunt, 'Cecil Pinsent and the Making of La Foce', *La Foce: A Garden and Landscape in Tuscany*, ed. Hunt, etc, University of Philadelphia Press, Pennsylvania, 2001, p. 276.
[341] Mariano, p. 6.
[342] Mazzini , p. 150.
[343] Shacklock & Mason,' Survey of a Twentieth Century Italian Garden', *Garden History*, 23:1, Summer 1995, p. 8.
[344] Mariano, p. 103.
[345] Galletti, 'A Record...' *Cecil Pinsent and His Gardens in Tuscany*, p. 54.
[346] Interview with the author, 9.05. 2006.
[347] Conversation with the author, 10.05.06, I Tatti, Florence.

became an intimate member through his marriage to Sybil Cutting. Nonetheless the evidence suggests that Scott had little input into Pinsent's intellectual development. The fact that Scott dedicated his *Architecture of Humanism* (1914) not to the Berensons, but to Pinsent, suggests the architect's practical knowledge was more important to Scott's understanding of architecture than Mary's encouragement or Berenson's archive. Further, it must be remembered that long before he met Scott, Pinsent was forging his own ideas; he had been apprenticed to some of London's leading architects and had already created a successful house and garden.[348] As a prize-winning student, his decision to tour Italy shows his interest in Renaissance humanism, and his sketches from the time reveal a fascination with the landscape as well as the architecture of the country.[349]

Practically, as well as intellectually, Scott's contribution appears to have been minimal; the laziness which prevented him from obtaining his expected First Class degree also undermined his professional career. Several times during their association Pinsent became so frustrated with Scott's lack of input that he threatened to dissolve the partnership. Even the besotted Mary Berenson observed: 'Cecil works very hard, and Geoffrey practically doesn't work at all'. [350] Origo, Scott's step-daughter, described him as 'the brilliant young architect and writer who had been working as Mr. Berenson's secretary', apparently oblivious to his putative partnership with Pinsent.[351] Even Richard Dunn, attempting to make the case for Scott's contribution to Le Balze, the only villa the partnership actually designed, admits Pinsent took charge of the architecture, overseeing the design and supervising the building, while 'Scott was mainly responsible for the furnishings'; Dunn then proceeds to make the ridiculous and unsubstantiated claim: 'It was the decorative side of Le Balze, as it had been with I

[348] Clarke claims he worked with WE Mountford, the architect of many major public buildings including Sheffield Town Hall, and C.E.Mallows, a leading exponent of the formal; Clarke, 'A Biography of Cecil Ross Pinsent', Garden History 26:2, Winter 1998, p. 181.
[349] Clarke, GH, p. 172, fig 2: A 1906 drawing of Certosa is more than half taken up with the surrounding landscape, as pine and cypress trees rise up a zigzagging slope to the city above.
[350] Ibid., p. 183.
[351] Origo, *Images*, p. 103.

Tatti, *setting the taste of the overall plan*, (my italics) which commanded most of Scott's attention.'[352]

Though Pinsent and Scott rented a large flat in the centre of the city to serve as their office, studio and living quarters, Scott spent much of the partnership living at I Tatti.[353] Having moved in with his patrons while repairs were being made to the flat, letters from Pinsent make it clear that Scott remained at I Tatti long after repairs were complete. Even after quitting the villa he spent most of his time in I Tatti's library after Mary Berenson urged him to write a book on architecture. In a 1913 letter to Mary, Pinsent asks about 'Geoffrey', indicating that Scott is, again, living at I Tatti. He adds, 'it is so comforting to think he is settling down at last to something resembling the life he likes', suggesting that he has abandoned the partnership already.[354] A fortnight later, Pinsent scribbled out the line of the letterhead with his and Scott's name on it, suggesting, once again, that the partnership had ended; here he asks after Scott's health and 'the Book', indicating that Scott's primary focus was his writing, while Pinsent was designing Le Balze.[355]

Scott's *The Architecture of Humanism* became a seminal text and its championing of the Baroque prevailed until the 1960s taste for minimalism consigned it to obscurity. Where architectural criticism had been primarily concerned with materials and surfaces, Scott's innovation was to interpret architecture primarily in terms of space: 'architecture gives us spaces of three dimensions in which we stand. And here is the very centre of architectural art.' He goes on, by 'modelling in space as a sculptor in clay... [the architect] designs his work as a work of art; that is, he attempts through its means to excite a certain mood in those who enter it'.[356] Unlike most architects who design through drawings, Pinsent worked with plasticine models, thus Scott's key image derives directly from his partner's unusual working methods. Indeed Scott's assertion

---

[352] Fantoni, p. 44.
[353] Sprigge, a close friend of Berenson, makes no mention of the partnership, claiming 'Geoffrey Scott stayed. on for twelve years at I Tatti as Berenson's private secretary.' Sprigge, p. 201.
[354] CP to MB, 10.08.13; I Tatti Archives.
[355] Ibid., 1.9.13, I Tatti Archives.
[356] Scott, p. 226.

that the architect's great skill is the understanding of space might have been inspired by Pinsent whom Jellicoe described as a "maestro' in the art of placing buildings in the landscape'. [357]

Scott also absorbed from Pinsent the idea that man humanizes his hostile environment by imposing architectural order: 'He may construct, within the world as it is, a pattern of the world as he would have it. This is the way to humanism, in philosophy, in life and in the arts.'[358] In 1909 Pinsent seems to have had a mystical revelation about the supremacy of order. Scribbled in pencil on a telegram form, his account of the experience is preserved in I Tatti's archives:

> And I looked and I was that this was the third (?) of the circumference of space and it was part of the Bowl of Unconsciousness and madness seized me and I danced to consciousness with wild moments of unutterable hideousness. And my body shook till my joints seemed ready to part; and I yelled curses and shrieked till fear entered into me. And the dance grew fainter with my exhaustion, till it ceased. And I stood motionless. And I perceived that the Three Points formed a great triangle inscribed within the Circle of Space. And as I watched and wondered a hand descended and within the Triangle drew a Circle. And within that Circle another Triangle. [359]

This early image of chaos tamed by architectural order suggests that even Scott's most basic premise was inspired by Pinsent. Certainly Pinsent's fascination with geometry is evident throughout his career. I Tatti, his first, large-scale project, is rather formulaic, with symmetrical forms filling the box parterres of the formal terraces. Le Balze and Villa Medici reveal a bolder use of geometry, with non-symmetrical patterns of simple circles and squares. Pinsent's final horticultural undertaking, La Foce, is much freer. Here human geometry is juxtaposed against natural forms; in the rose garden, for example, a curving pergola underlines the swell of the hillside while intensifying the geometry of the abutting beds.

---

[357] Fantoni et al, *Cecil Pinsent and His Gardens In Italy*, p. 24.
[358] Scott, p. 28.
[359] I Tatti Archives, CP to MB, dated. on back 'Cecil 1909'. Though the context is unknown, it is filed in the correspondence between MB and CP, suggesting that the archivist believed it was written for Mary Berenson. Fiorella Superbi, the current archivist, asserts that the explanatory note on the back is in Nicky Mariano's hand, though this doesn't guarantee the description was written to Mary.

Pinsent also revealed his interest in geometry with such complex forms as the *rhombiscuboctahedron* first used at I Tatti.[360] This unusual, twenty-six sided sphere is commonly found in Renaissance prints to evoke humanist geometry. Though Pinsent had used it to decorate balustrades at Le Balze and I Tatti, at La Foce it is less a bravura shape than a clever device linking landscape, garden and dwelling. The polygons first appear on the public road as finials framing views of the Val d'Orcia; they reappear on the private approach on the piers of the entrance gates, and feature, yet again, on the main newel posts inside the villa.

During the First World War all pretence of a partnership ended when Pinsent joined the British Red Cross while Scott attached himself to the British Embassy in Rome as Press Secretary, then, in 1917 married Cutting and embarked on a life of neurotic affluence.[361] After the First World War Pinsent returned to Florence and resumed his work unimpeded by Scott's indolence. Through the 1920s he worked constantly, with commissions ranging from new buildings, through alterations, to garden designs and interior decoration. By the early 1930s America's stock-market crash was being felt in Europe and Pinsent's projects tended to be small additions, alterations and garden features. Among his more eccentric clients was Mrs. George Keppel, mistress of King Edward VII for whom, in 1926, he made a 'Union Jack' garden with paths radiating in the form of the British flag. In 1925 he did a large formal garden for the Villa Papignano at San Domenico for American HS Whitaker, and in 1935 he inserted a pool garden into the grounds at Villa Capponi.

---

[360] Galletti claims this complex geometric form derives from the treatise *The Divina Porportione* (1497) by Luca Pacioli; he also believes Pinsent's use of complex geometric patterns derives from Giovani Battista Ferrari's 1633 *De Florum Cultura.* Galletti, *Cecil Pinsent and his Gardens in Tuscany*, p. 54.

[361] The marriage annoyed Wharton and outraged the Berensons; Bernard lost his mistress while Mary, who'd intended Scott to marry Berenson's new secretary, Nicky Mariano, succumbed to a protracted. nervous breakdown. Scott's marriage soon faltered and in 1923, still seeking a strong female figure to nurture his work, he began an affair with Vita Sackville-West which left him in a state of nervous collapse. In 1925 he abandoned Cutting and returned to England to write *The Portrait of Zelide*, a study of the eighteenth century blue-stocking Madame de Charriere. In 1926 Cutting and Scott were divorced; the following year he moved to New York to write a biography of James Boswell, and in 1929, attended by his faithful friend Cecil Pinsent, who had, three days before, accompanied him home from a holiday in England, Geoffrey Scott died of pneumonia. Though Scott always intended to write a sequel to *The Architecture of Humanism*, Origo notes, poignantly, 'I still possess a large piece of foolscap which lay for many weeks upon the centre of his desk, bearing in his fine scholar's hand, the following words and these only: "A HISTORY OF TASTE, Volume 1, Chapter 1, It is very difficult..."' (*Images*, p. 104)

Though these projects Pinsent evolved a new Anglo-Florentine style of horticulture; after the early romantic Arts and Crafts approach and the later scholarly Baroque style, Pinsent ushered in the Modern Tuscan style. In 1931 he published his only written record on the subject of garden design for a popular Italian magazine, *Il Giardino Fiorito*. Written in Italian, entitled 'Giardini moderni all'Italiana', this article defines Pinsent's horticultural credo. Proposing plans for a modest villa garden it divides the space into rooms bisected by a central alley.[362] Beside the villa a grassy parterre recalls the bowling green of classical Italian design and the lawn beloved of the Anglo-Florentines. The enclosures closest to the house suggest the classic *giardino segreto*, which, despite its name, was rarely secret, being simply a private, intimate space often attached to a house. Here Pinsent allowed some modest embellishment – pool, balustrade or sculpture; at the far end of the garden, hidden from view, he also bows to contemporary taste and permits a discrete flower garden.

In the accompanying text Pinsent states three principles of 'the modern garden in the Italian style'. The first is 'symmetrical planning'. Though it contravened the dictates of the modernist movement then dominating European architecture, symmetry was an essential element of Renaissance design. Nonetheless, despite naming it as the first of his design principles, Pinsent virtually abandoned symmetry after I Tatti; Le Balze, and La Foce evolve more organically, achieving harmony, in the modernist manner promoted by Christopher Tunnard, through balance rather than symmetry.

As his second principle, Pinsent asserts that the main elements of the design must be 'permanent', so that the garden appears complete in winter as well as summer. While this preoccupation with evergreen, architectural features is part of the formal horticultural tradition, it was also espoused by the modernists. Though Pinsent appends a list of appropriate shrubs and flowers he stresses that seasonal plants should not be essential to the design.

---

[362] Cecil Pinsent, 'Giardini moderni all'Italiana,' *Il Giardino Fiorito*, 5, (June 1931), pp 69-73.

Finally Pinsent insists that the 'various aspects (of the garden) must reveal themselves one by one' so the visitor experiences a series of impressions.[363] This preoccupation with variety of mood and style he probably learned from Villa Gamberaia [37], which he once described as a garden one leaves 'with the impression of having spent more time there, and of having discovered more levels than there really are'.[364]

Though the article was written towards the end of his career, the principles Pinsent espouses - symmetry, permanence and variety –were evident in his earliest efforts. The formality, absence of floral embellishment, variety of spaces, sense of enclosure and abundance evergreens are all hallmarks of Pinsent's mature style. Despite the fact that many of his projects were planned and executed in stages, some extending over years or even decades, they all display an extraordinary degree of cohesion. Though Pinsent designed intuitively, he heeded Wharton's advice, copying the spirit rather than the letter of the Italian style. With their classical design, human scale and contemporary simplicity his gardens are still among the most admired in the region; one client praised Pinsent's ability to interpret the essence of Tuscany:

> On the hills of Florence, there are few modern houses that fit perfectly with the olives and cypresses of the landscape. These house are designed by Cecil Pinsent, a young English architect, and though they are in no way imitations ... of the dignified villas near them, yet they are so much a part of the Tuscan scene that Italian architects often stop to admire the manner in which an Englishman has understood their architecture, but how to use its characteristic lines for entirely modern needs.[365]

With his base in the city centre and his professional links with the artisan class Pinsent was probably more conscious than his friends in 'villadom' of the build-up of Fascism. From the mid 1930s he became increasingly disenchanted with his adopted country. In 1938 he wrote to Mary Berenson, 'What I have offered is not congenial to the time, and

---

[363] V Shacklock, D Mason, 'Villa Le Balze: a broad assessment of a modern garden in the Italian Style' *Journal of Garden History*: 15, 3, Summer 1995, p. 185.
[364] Shacklock, *Villa Le Balze* (pamphlet) p. 13. Gamberaia clearly had a profound influence on Pinsent; among his very small archive he retained a drawing of the water gardens at Gamberaia executed in the style of the eighteenth century illustrator, Zocchi. (Fantoni etc, p. 22)
[365] Fantoni, *Cecil Pinsent and his Gardens in Tuscany*, p. 56 quoting Y. Maraini, 'The English Architect Abroad', *The Architectural Review* LXXI January-June 1932, pp 6-7.

what the times want is not congenial to me.'[366] Just before the outbreak of the Second World War he retired to England to live with his sister on the south coast. Unable to resist the lure of Italy, however, he returned to Florence at the end of the war having joined the Allied Control Commission as an officer in the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archive Commission.[367] Before being demobbed in 1945 he wrote to Berenson, in Italy: 'I owe you a deep debt of gratitude – you and Mary, that is; for it was you who brought me to Italy and started me off (having exercised a great deal of 'pazienza' I know) and made possible 28 happy years spend in this country, of which I would not wish to change a day.'[368]

On his sister's death in 1949 Pinsent moved to 20 St Anthony's Road, Bournemouth, the first house he ever designed, to care for the widowed Edmund Houghton. When Houghton died in 1953, Pinsent moved to Switzerland hoping the alpine air would help his bronchitis. Ten years later, on 5 December 1963, he died and was buried in the local churchyard at Hilterfingen. He was virtually unknown, and his posthumous fame would have been a source of bemusement.[369]

While bowing to the vanities and historical obsessions of the community, Pinsent evolved a style which was both modern and Tuscan. Respecting the landscape, history and vernacular, his gardens reflected the exigencies of contemporary life, being small, low maintenance, employing modest water effects and accommodating the English taste for floral colour and seasonal variety. Given the radical styles which were being explored in France at the time by such innovators as Gabriel Guevrekian or the Vera Brothers, Pinsent's innovations seem modest. Given the experiments which were being conducted in Germany and the Netherlands with native plants and ecological designs, his anticipation of future needs was also modest. He did, however, devise a style which was appropriate to the community it served.

---

[366] CP to MB; 9 October 1938, I Tatti archives.
[367] Pinsent was mentioned. in dispatches for his efforts at preserving Italy's artistic heritage.
[368] CP to BB, 30.9.45, I Tatti archives.
[369] Fantoni, ed., *Cecil Pinsent and His Gardens In Tuscany*, Ethne Clarke, 'Cecil Pinsent: A Biography', p. 27; 'Cecil's brother has told me that Cecil would be surprised and not a little amused by all this attention.'

Ottewill describes Pinsent's work as a 'sensitive' and 'modern' interpretation of classic Italian horticulture, noting, in particular, his wide box borders and high, enclosing hedges, his use of grass parterres and his austere planting. The bold, sculptural quality of Pinsent's work, however, is more Modernist than modern. Though Hunt perhaps goes too far in suggesting that Pinsent's hand-made garden features exhibit a 'machinelike' modernity, his abhorrence of decoration, his clean lines and solid, geometric forms reveal a modernist sensibility, in line with the architectural principles articulated by Le Corbusier and other avant-garde designers.[370] Where the Anglo-Florentine garden had been stuck, first in the Middle Ages and later in the baroque period, Pinsent created a contemporary style which moved it firmly into the twentieth century.

Interrupted by the First World War, the villa fantasy assumed an elegiac quality. No longer the playground of affluent romantics nor the cultivated backdrop against which academics and art dealers displayed their intellectual and physical goods, the garden became a place of refuge, a bulwark against the horrors of the modern world. In 1928 Nichols reveals the typical, quasi-religious tone when she describes the gardens as 'a joy to the eye and a balm to the soul', continuing, 'within moss-grown walls where slender cypresses frame lovely vistas stretching to the horizon ... there is a peace that passes understanding.'[371] More explicitly she notes: 'since the shadow of the great war ceased to darken the face of the earth, a general desire for beauty has led to the enlargement of existing gardens and the creation of new ones throughout the Italian peninsula.'[372]

With her New World perspective Nichols regrets the lack of innovation, noting that the reverence for precedent dominates design, 'while originality plays a very small part'. She deplores the fashion for the baroque, whose novelty, she observes 'lies merely in a clever reproduction of phases long despised and then forgotten,' and concludes,

---

[370] Hunt, *La Foce*, p. 292.
[371] Nichols, p. vii.
[372] Ibid., p. 229.

'Futurism such as characterises the decorative arts in France and Germany seems less able to flourish upon Italian soil'.[373] From these remarks, and indeed from his absence in her book, Nichols appears to have been oblivious to Pinsent's work, particularly at La Foce, which he was at the time, developing with Origo. A visit to this estate would have assuaged her fears. The final and perhaps the best of the Anglo-Florentine villas, La Foce combines the machine-age aesthetic, geometric harmonies and bold simplicity of Modernism within the Tuscan vernacular. Indeed, with their respect for tradition, their understanding of the local climate, their subtle insertion of romantic English flowers into a classical Italian idiom, and their obvious love of the surrounding countryside, Origo and Pinsent exemplify the best of the Anglo-Florentine garden makers.

[373] Nichols, p. 240.

VII. Swansong: Later History and The Anglo-Florentine Legacy

'We slope to Italy at last/and youth, by green degrees.' [374]

Scattered about the Tuscan landscape, in their villas surrounded by glorious gardens, furnished with Renaissance art, the Anglo-Florentines created a charmed life; Nesta de Robeck, recalling an evening at I Tatti before the First World War, claimed: 'how handsome all those young people were, BB, Mary, Lady Sybil Cutting, Geoffrey Scott, Cecil Pinsent – all the beauty and wit seemed to be gathered together.'[375]

At the beginning of the First World War Italy remained 'a nervous neutral with tacit Allied sympathies.'[376] Having prevaricated for many months, on 24 May, 1914 she entered the on the side of the allies. Acton, revealing perhaps more Anglo-Florentine fantasy than actual fact, claims that the inflamed mob responded to the announcement with a cry of: 'Long live Italy and Dante, Long live D'Annunzio!' adding 'What other country ever went to war with thunders of applause to poets quick and dead?'[377]

Throughout Tuscany villas were deserted for the safety of the city or the luxury of exile, as landlords abandoned their estates to four years of conflict which wreaked the same damage as four centuries of slow neglect had previously done. On 10 December 1917 a reporter on London's *Daily News,* entrenched in the Venetian countryside, revealed that the allies caused as much destruction as the enemies:

> among the trees are many white country houses standing out boldly in the Italian way instead of being hidden, as such places would be in England, behind high walls and in the recesses of a park. All these pleasant villas and country homes are shuttered and look thoroughly deserted now... but I saw the calm on several of them suddenly stimulated to volcanic life by the arrival of a British shell which punched a neat round hole in the sunlit façade and set every window belching heavy black smoke from the explosion within.[378]

With the onset of hostilities the septuagenarian Paget reluctantly returned to England, selling her Bellosguardo to an Austrian noble under whose protection it was largely

---

[374] 'By the Fireside', Robert Browning.
[375] Sprigge, p. 200.
[376] Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 50.
[377] Ibid., p. 51.
[378] Vernon Lee, *The Golden Keys*, John Lane, London, 1925, p. 245.

undamaged. The pacifist Lee left her villa in the care of her Italian staff and spent the war years in London, campaigning, rather undiplomatically, against the bombing of Germany. At the onset of the war Berenson abandoned the Germanic spelling of his first name, *Bernhard*, and retreated to England, leaving Pinsent to oversee the restorations at I Tatti. Writing to Mary, Pinsent reveals the difficulty of working in wartime, explaining that cheques are not cashable, there is no money to pay the workers and he is preparing to lock up the treasures 'lest refugees commandeer the villa.'[379] Nonetheless work continued; both Cutting and Strong provided Pinsent with commissions helping the young architect survive that turbulent time.

Despite being in her seventies, Ross stayed on to protect her estate, sharing her villa with the Italian officers who requisitioned it, while running her farms on the labour of old men as the young men had all been conscripted. Ross's letters to Mary Berenson record heat, drought and boredom: (26 August 1918) 'Dear Mary. It is awfully hot, which is not fresh news,' she then goes on to report on her nephew's operation. On 27 August she begins: 'Hot, hot, hot. That is my news...', then she notes that the son of one of Mary's *contadini* has been taken prisoner ... 'I shall see about sending a (sack?) of bread every month to him. They have been hit hard by the hailstorm which smashed me also... I have four prisoners to whom I send, none of whom I know, but they are relatives of some of my people.' Happily, the following day she reports: 'Darling Mary it has actually let fall a few drops of rain.'[380]

Cutting and her daughter Iris stayed on at the Villa Medici, hosting convalescing officers, for whose company they competed with I Tatti, La Pietra and Villa Le Balze. Origo's biographer reports that the two thousand German troops posted in and around Florence had little effect on those who remained: 'extra locks were put on doors and gates ...but for the most part the foreigners simply became more closely entwined.'[381] Describing an idyllic era of picnics and parties, Origo notes that it may seem incredible to her readers that this was wartime, 'But the truth was that in my mother's ivory tower,

---

[379] CP to MB 9.8.14.
[380] Ross Archives, British Institute, Florence; WAT: 1; E: 5; Ff1-10.
[381] Moorehead, p. 48.

as was the case in many other villas inhabited by foreigners on the Florentine hills, the war was only a distant rumble, and inconvenient and unpleasant noise offstage.' She does assert that there was a great deal of political talk at the Villa Medici, 'though much of it in a tone of civilized and superior detachment.'[382]

As the women of the community organized fund-raisers for the Red Cross, Pinsent and Scott, ensconced in their urban flat, rented a piano and hosted the sort of soirees formerly held by their patrons, while Acton gleefully reported that there was no lack of petrol and he could finally explore the countryside undisturbed by tourists. Elsewhere he noted: 'During the First World War Florence remained a city of ivory towers, where art historians could pursue their investigations without disturbance... they came and went; we would show them round our villa, listening to their comments and attributions, as they paused before each picture that held their fancy...At this time hairs were being split finer and finer, and the most obscure of the Tuscan masters were finding biographers at Yale and Harvard.'[383]

Despite such accounts of wartime jollity, some recognized that this was the end of the idyll; William Haslam explains the ill-conceived marriage between Scott and Cutting: 'their decision to cling together was made in the face of their common fear that the war would bring their world to an end'.[384] Acton, too, was less sanguine about the peace: 'The virtues of the Teuton had proved more disastrous than other peoples' vices. Science had been concentrated on Europe's destruction: some of the finest intellects had been devoted to annihilation. A great deal of barbed wire had been left behind, and it was for my generation to clear it away.'[385] The final, and probably the most poignant of the Anglo-Florentine gardens, Origo's La Foce, was created, in part, to expiate this very desecration. Recalling her first visit to the vast estate, Origo records its long history as a refuge for outlaws, then describes her intention 'to arrest the erosion of those steep ridges, to turn this bare clay into wheat-fields, to rebuild these farms and see prosperity

[382] Origo, *Images*, p. 133.
[383] Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 58.
[384] Scott, p. xiv.
[385] Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 91.

return to their inhabitants, to restore the greenness of these mutilated woods'.[386] Although she makes no reference to the recent war, her final image inevitably summons up its victims.

In 1919, in the introduction to his revision of Latham's *The Gardens of Italy*, Bolton noted the improved conditions of the country and its villas in the quarter century since he'd last visited; 'though some losses have occurred, it does not seem fair to bring the customary charges against the Italians of indifference to their own past.'[387] Though he does not attribute this change to the example of the Anglo-Florentines, it must have influenced the Italians' attitude to their villas and gardens.

Eberlein's *Villas of Florence and Tuscany* and Jellico's *Italian Gardens of the Renaissance* demonstrate the continuing interest in Italian horticulture, though the First World War marked the end of the great phase of Anglo-Florentine garden making. Though La Foce was yet to be built, it was more of a swan-song, a summing up. After the armistice, the English expatriates returned to their villas to find their adopted homeland beset by labour troubles. Communist agitation led to civil unrest, focussing particularly train strikes. In the early 1920s, after the Bolshevik Revolution, some began to fear the 'Russian Menace' as small Communist parties began forming throughout Europe. Sprigge recounts how a group of Tuscan peasants waving a red flag arrived in Settignano to be met by Ross, 'in command of such a stream of Tuscan invective that they all fled, believing that the devil had a hand in it.'[388] Ironically, the real danger, Fascism, went largely unnoticed.

Some, like the Berensons, were wary of Mussolini, though most Anglo-Florentines were seduced by his claim to have saved Italy from Communism. In 1924, from the vantage point of her English dower house, Paget hailed Mussolini as 'courageous and single-minded', saving the country from the clutches of 'Communism, Anarchy and

---

[386] Origo, *Images*, p. 210.
[387] Bolton, preface (no page numbers).
[388] Sprigge, p. 221.

Bolshevism'.[389] Others were won over by his pro-capitalist stance, his imposition of order, abolition of state bureaucracy, grand building programme and his much vaunted ability to make the trains run on time. Despite rigged elections, overt bribery and xenophobia, Acton reports, 'In 1932 ... foreigners in Italy had no reason to inquire too closely into the troubles of the Italians. A large percentage of Englishmen were persuaded that Italy had never lived before Mussolini swaggered on the scene.'[390]

Writing later about life in the 1930s, the expatriates are quick to distance themselves from Fascism. Beevor reveals that away from the cities politics appeared to consist mainly of 'wearing the colours of your party, shouting insults at your opponents, and occasionally, coming to blows.'[391] Such ignorance recalls the refusal of the earlier Anglo-Florentines to recognize the modernization that was taking place through the late nineteenth century. Ironically, the mantle of the ancients, promoted by the Anglo-Florentines, was given a sinister new interpretation by a generation of Italians revelling in their unexpected victory in (what was then) Abyssinia. Suddenly the nation believed itself to be 'in very deed the heirs of the ancient Romans'.[392] Nonetheless as the Fascists gained power many expatriates believed that the traditional enmities between families and villages were simply being expressed in the allegiance to different parties; the red flag of the Socialist and the black flag of the Fascist seemed a modern iteration of the battle between Guelphs and Ghibellines. At the end of the 1930s, returning after a decade in China, Acton expected talk of war, 'but wherever I went the talk was only of Mrs. Simpson'.[393]

Despite their widespread acceptance of Mussolini, however, under *Il Duce* there was subtle change in the attitude towards the expatriates: 'Service was less willing and the old type of domestic, who considered himself a member of the family, was dying out.'[394] The scarcity of labour made it hard to plan major horticultural projects;

---

[389] Paget, *Tower*, p.x.
[390] Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 234.
[391] Beevor, p. 161.
[392] Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 381.
[393] Ibid., p. 389.
[394] Ibid., p. 110.

nonetheless, as often happens in times of turmoil, many simply turned away and quietly cultivated their gardens. Acton reports, 'As foreigners we kept aloof. My father continued to improve the garden and his collection of paintings, undisturbed'.[395] The chronology of Pinsent's works reveals that in the decade from 1920-30 he had more commissions than ever, though most were modest projects such as extensions, terraces, pools, pergolas, flower gardens, *limonaias* and grottos.[396] The collapse of the American stock market in 1929 further undermined the Anglo-Florentine community. By 1931 Strong's annual income was diminished by four fifths, to $5,000.[397] Even those whose finances were not directly affected would have felt the absence of the affluent clients whose art purchases supported them. The only major horticultural projects undertaken at this time were Sitwell's Montegufoni, which was far from the agitation in Florence, and Origo's La Foce, even further from the urban unrest and part of a much larger programme of agricultural expansion.

Origo was more implicated in the regime than the other Anglo-Florentines; with an Italian husband and a farm dependent on the subsidies of the reforming government she may have overlooked the growing evidence of Fascist atrocities, though she admits, 'even in our secluded life at La Foce it became impossible not to observe, read, listen and speculate.'[398] As the prospect of war marched irrevocably nearer, however, most still believed 'Mussolini could not be such a fool as to join the fray and run the risk of losing the advantages already won.'[399] They were wrong. Later Origo explained that the Italians felt the war had been forced upon them by the Germans, and they never felt responsible for any participation in it. At the time she was perplexed that the Italian people should turn against their natural allies; in her pre-war diary she notes that the German alliance is contrary to Italy's interests, its natural instincts, its historical traditions and the will of most of its inhabitants. Attempting, perhaps, to justify the betrayal of those amongst whom she'd cast her lot, she goes on:

---

[395] Ibid., p. 110.
[396] Galletti, 'A Record of the works of Pinsent in Tuscany', *Pinsent And His Gardens In Tuscany*, p. 64.
[397] Shacklock, *Villa Le Balze*, (pamphlet) p. 18.
[398] Origo, *Images*, p. 225.
[399] Mariano, p. 242.

> In a people as profoundly individualistic and sceptical as the Italian, eighteen years of Fascism have not destroyed the critical spirit, and this is allied to an inborn fluidity and adaptability which causes them (now as in the past) to interpret all general statements and theories in light of the particular occasion, and thus to attach no undue importance to the field of politics... And it is this same fluid adaptability (which can be interpreted by those temperamentally opposed to it as a cynical opportunism) that has rendered possible the German alliance. The Axis, regarded purely as a temporary policy of self-interest, forced upon them by the 'intransigent' attitude of the democracies, has been accepted by a people which, in accepting it, yet has not modified its instinctive antipathy for Germany and for the barbaric and brutal aspects of the German *Weltanschaung*.[400]

Nonetheless, in 1940 when Italy joined the war on the axis side, many Anglo-Florentines had to flee for their own safety. While the Swiss were hostile to refugees, demanding evidence of great wealth, genuine medical need or an onward ticket to another country, such affluent nobles as Sitwell, the Actons and Lady Lubbock (nee Sybil Cutting/ Scott) were powerful enough to secure refuge. Berenson was doubly vulnerable as a Jewish American; though there had been little anti-Semitism in Italy since1439 when the Signoria decreed that every Jew must wear a yellow badge, Berenson and Nicky Mariano went into hiding at the hills near Vallombrosa, where they were given quasi-diplomatic protection by the Minister of the Republic of San Marino to the Vatican.[401] Mary Berenson, too sick to move, remained at I Tatti, cared for by Mariano's sister, who also guarded the Berensons's most valuable books and paintings in her city apartment.

For those who waited out the war in England, there was little news of Tuscany or the fate of the foreign community. The Italian armistice of 1943 was met with relief, but German retribution was fierce. Treating their former allies as enemies, they occupied the country, starving the locals, burning what produce they could not use and finally bombing the bridges over the Arno in their retreat. While the villas inevitably suffered incidental injury – passing shells and mortars, the gardens also suffered much malicious damage: thousands of iris bulbs were ripped from Ross's entrance avenue by the Fascist general who commandeered her villa, Origo's lemon trees were torn from their pots and that Anglo-Florentine favourite, the Villa Gamberaia, was set alight by departing the German officer who had used the villa to store army maps and charts; the estate

---

[400] Origo, *War*, p. 58/9.
[401] Beevor, p. 187.

suffered such extensive damage that Acton later asserted: 'All garden lovers are indebted to its present owner for healing its war wounds with such consummate art.'[402]

The Second World War marked the demise of the Anglo-Florentine community. By the end of the war many of the protagonists had died, others didn't have the heart to return to their war-damaged estates; still others were deterred by the threat of a Communist take-over.[403] Most of their properties reverted to Italian ownership or were transformed into commercial enterprises or educational institutes. A few émigrés came trickling back; in 1945 Berenson wrote poignantly of post-war life: 'The pine-clad, cypress-studded hills above me...my favourite haunts for nearly half a century.... have been sown by the Germans with mines, and wayfarers have lost their lives. Walks must be limited to the high road winding steeply past Vincigliata to the hilltop above – a little arduous for my eighty years.[404]

In 1946, in a letter to Berenson, Pinsent writes from London: 'I [sic] was good to hear that the old Florentine residents were coming back one by one. But I imagine that conditions are not easy for them, especially [sic] the food question...'[405] But it was civil unrest, more than rationing or unexploded mines, which caused the greatest anxiety. Beevor recounts that in 1946, with the imminent departure of British and American troops, reports began to circulate that the Communists were plotting a coup. Lina Waterfield living alone in Poggio Gherardo, was advised to arm herself, though she reasoned that she was in more danger from the gun than from any assailant.[406] Amid Communist cries of '*La terra ai contadini*' villa life was threatened, while,

---

[402] Acton, *Villa*, p. 146.
[403] During the war Sitwell died in Switzerland, leaving Montegufoni to his son Osbert, who had neither the money nor the inclination to change the estate; thus it was preserved, virtually intact, until Osbert's death, when his heir sold it to an Italian family. Cutting also died during the war; her daughter Iris Origo, already running one rural estate, sold the villa to the Italian family which still owns it today. Lina Waterfield, whose husband had died during the war, returned to Poggio Gherardo and began renting rooms to paying guests in order to cover the costs of restoration. In the early years of post-war rationing and general austerity, English visitors hurried to take advantage of the warm climate, good wine and simple farm cuisine. Eventually however, Waterfield too, had to sell when she couldn't afford to pay the death duties on the property after the untimely death of her son who was the legal owner of the estate.
[404] Raison, p. 100.
[405] CP to BB, 16.6.46. I Tatti Archives.
[406] Beevor, p. 224.

ironically, the *contadini* themselves turned their back on the land leaving the hard work of farming for factories, shops and tourist industries; young women, having tasted liberation in the war, preferred efficient city flats to the ancient farmstead under the ruling patriarch.

Having survived since the thirteenth century, the *mezzadria* system was abandoned in less than a generation. Those who remained on the land demanded wages and their own houses – a demand, many landowners felt, fomented largely by political agitators.[407] Large-scale farmers like the Origos had to invest in new equipment to compensate for the lack of labour. Small-scale farmers like Lina Waterfield at Poggio Gherardo, unable to survive, had to sell out to developers. More common was the fate of Le Balze; left by Strong to his daughter, it remained uninhabited through the threat of Communist take-over, then in the 1970s it was sold to an American University. Ignoring his wife's plea that he leave I Tatti to her children, Berenson left his estate to Harvard University so it would continue as a center of research and intellectual stimulation. Similarly Acton, having no offspring, left La Pietra to New York University. Other villas, like Paget's Bellosguardo, Sitwell's Montegufoni and Temple Leader's Villa Maiano became hotels.

In the 1950s H.V.Morton, in *A Traveler In Italy* writes of two rich elderly friends, 'trying to find peace in a troubled world' renting a villa in Fiesole:

> There was nothing the English colony of a century ago would not have recognized: the brown-washed building with its central tower, standing in its *podere* of farmland: the box-edged garden with its fountain and the double line of lemon trees in terracotta tubs; the tiled shelter in which the lemons are placed under sacking in winter. It was all there, even to the Italian family: the butler-handyman in white linen coat and black trousers, ready to receive guests; the cook, his ample, sallow wife, a dark-eyed daughter busy about some household task. It looked the same on the surface, but, of course, it was all different. The wages alone would have ruined the Brownings in a month. Rent was high, living was expensive, but, above all, it was lonely. There is now no English colony in the old sense. Today the villas of Tuscany are prestige homes for wealthy manufacturers from Turin and Milan.'[408]

The break-up of the Anglo-Florentine community, plus the taint of Fascism attached to all things Italian, made the subject of Italian gardens unfashionable for decades, until

---

[407] Origo, *War*, p. 9.
[408] Raison, p. 242.

interest was revived in 1961 by Barbara Johnson, who, under the pseudonym Georgina Masson, inspired a whole new generation with her *Italian Gardens*. Meanwhile Berenson and Acton hung on in their villas as living relics of an earlier age. A few eccentric Englishmen, like the late Lord Lambton, continued the Anglo-Florentine tradition, retiring to the Italian countryside to develop his fifteenth-century Villa Cetinale.

Ultimately, however, a new version of the Italian idyll rejuvenated the abandoned countryside. Farm houses, often as fine as the villas they serviced, were much more practical for the new generation, their thick walls making them cool in summer and easy to heat in winter, while their modest size made them more manageable for the new Italophiles who did not have the inclination or the finance to hire domestic staff. Writing in the 1970s Acton notes that ancient estates, like Montegufoni were languishing on the market unsold while these farm houses or *casa coloniche* were as popular as villas had been at the turn of the century.[409]

Though many Italians were, for many years, reluctant to create grand gardens fearing a Communist government might nationalize their lands, recently, the stability provided by Italy's entry into the European Community has provoked a tentative resurgence in garden-making. Here again, the English influence prevails; as Italy has no significant horticultural colleges, Italian gardeners are routinely trained in English institutes, while English designers are routinely chosen over local designers.[410] While this has provoked some enmity in the profession it is worth heeding the words of Origo, one of the great Anglo-Florentine garden makers. In the introduction to her account of the war years in the Val d'Orcia, Origo affirms her love of Italy and its people, but concludes with a plea against nationalism:

---

[409] Acton, *Tuscan Villas*, p. 14.

[410] This point was made by Giorgio Galletti at the Anglo-Italian Garden conference, Images and Shadows: Anglo-Italian Cross-Fertilisations Conference, Hestercombe Gardens Trust, Cheddon Fitzpaine, Taunton, 17-19 June, 2005. Italy's only significant contemporary designer, the Florentine Pietro Porcinai (1910-1986) was raised on the Villa Gamberaia where his father worked as head gardener. Combining Renaissance formality with modernist simplicity, his most famous creation, Villa il Roseto (c 1960) used cutting-edge technology to create a raised parterre of op-art swirls, beneath which a huge grotto-like car-port/ballroom/belvedere offers magnificent views over the landscape.

> I have become chary of generalizations about countries and nations; I believe in individuals and in the relationship of individuals to one another. When I look back upon these years of tension and expectation, of destruction and sorrow, it is individual acts of kindness, courage or faith that illuminate them.[411]

She recalls watching a British prisoner helping a peasant woman draw water from the well, and the peasant woman mending his socks and knitting him sweaters, and tearfully baking her best cake for him on the day of his departure. 'These – the shared, simple acts of everyday life –are the realities on which international understanding can be built. In these, and in the realization that has come to many thousands, that people of other nations are, after all, just like themselves, we may, perhaps, place our hopes.'[412]

[411] Origo, *War*, p. 16.
[412] Ibid., p. 16.

VIII. Summary and Conclusion

It is easy to denigrate the Anglo-Florentines and many did. Huxley described their chosen city as 'a third-rate provincial town, colonized by English Sodomites and middle-aged Lesbians.'[413] A generation later, Mary McCarthy accused the English of expropriating the living city and transforming it into a shrine to the past. Excoriating the old maids 'of both sexes' she claims their 'sickly love' denied the vibrant modern metropolis, turning its history into 'an incubus on its present population... pressing on the modern city like a debt, blocking progress.'[414] Nonetheless, they did research and promote classical horticultural traditions which may well have been lost forever through the two World Wars. Furthermore, without their dedication, scholarship, effort and wealth many significant gardens would have been destroyed, and the modern Italian tradition would not have been created.

Over the years the Anglo-Florentines have been accused of all manner of horticultural heresies, from Wharton's suggestion of their 'Anglicizing the Tuscan garden' through Acton's assertion that they 'adapted' rather than 'absorbed' the Tuscan elements, to Quest-Ritson's condemnation of their style as 'pastiche'.[415] This thesis demonstrates that such blanket terms are both inaccurate and inappropriate. Inevitably, while they looked at the art of Gozzoli, Giotto and Botticelli, the fiction of Boccaccio, Dante and Colonna, the essays of Alberti, and Pliny and Virgil before him, what the Anglo-Florentines created was unique and of its time. But it was not a single entity.

Though such astute critics as Wharton, Masson, Acton, Hobhouse, Attlee or Quest-Ritson have failed to note the fact, Anglo-Florentine horticulture falls into several distinct phases, reflecting the changing tastes of the wider European community as well as the different temperaments of the garden-makers involved. During their eighty years' reign over the Florentine hills, the Anglo-Florentines ranged from romantic Medievalism through neo-Renaissance elegance to Modernist simplicity.

---

[413] Beevor, p. 145.
[414] McCarthy, *The Stones of Florence*, p. 22; p. 23.
[415] Wharton, *Italian Villas*, p. 21; Acton, *Villas*, p. 170; Quest-Ritson, p. 127.

This thesis represents the first in-depth study of the Anglo-Florentine garden. Having examined the obvious examples such as Acton's La Pietra, Berenson's I Tatti and Sitwell's Montegufoni it has unearthed lesser known examples such as Lee's Villa Palmerino, Ross's Poggio Gherardo and Temple Leader's Villa Maiano. It has also analyzed several gardens, such as those of Graham and Lucas, which are often ignored because their physical whereabouts cannot be ascertained.

Examining these gardens as a group, it has teased out common attitudes towards landscape and horticulture; it has also explored the practicalities of gardening, and farming, in Tuscany a century ago. Unlike many studies, this thesis is grounded in a detailed physical examination of the extant gardens. As well as examining current and contemporary scholarship, it has looked beyond the obvious sources to glean evidence of attitudes and intentions from such peripheral sources as the diaries, letters, fiction, prose and paintings created by and for the community.

In conclusion, this study posits that the term 'Anglo-Florentine' can best be used to define the nationality, location and era of this particular group of garden-makers. Implicit in the term is a love of the Tuscan landscape, a love nurtured by art and literature, but played out in picnics, touring, villa visits, and primarily, the creation of gardens. Also implicit in the term is an historically sensitive approach, a desire to create gardens appropriate to the villa. Beyond this however, the term does not describe a particular style. The image often summoned by the term suggests a cacophony of ancient architecture, floral borders, lawns replacing gravel terraces, architectural features smothered in scented climbers, sculptural urns obscured by cascading geraniums, olive groves filled with flowering shrubs, vineyards underplanted with bulbs and Renaissance parterres stuffed with bedding plants.

While this parody reflects some truths, the research presented here reveals that Anglo-Florentine gardens were much more subtle, sympathetic and varied than anything usually encompassed in the term. Indeed, the gardens created by the community are so

varied that the term should be used with modifying adjectives: a 'Medieval', 'Renaissance', 'Baroque' or 'Modern Italian' Anglo-Florentine garden.

PART 2: THE GARDENS

IX. A Medieval Fantasy: Sir John Temple Leader's Villa Maiano and Vincigliata

Sir John Temple Leader (1810-1903) is one of many enigmatic Englishmen who were seduced by Tuscany and her medieval past. For reasons which nobody has quite fathomed, in the early 1840s, in the midst of a promising career as a Whig politician - London's National Portrait gallery has several portraits of him - the young MP suddenly quit England. After several years of travel he settled outside Florence where he restored not one but two historic properties. His first, the Villa Maiano, is a traditional suburban villa with a crenellated tower in the hillside village of Maiano; his second is a picturesque Gothic castle in splendid isolation at the top of the hill behind. For both dwellings Temple Leader created simple, imaginative garden settings, but his real horticultural feat was to reforest the massive hillside between them.

By the nineteenth century the hills north of Florence were an empty scrubland pitted with the quarries which supplied the stone to build the city's Renaissance palaces. The raw cliff faces depicted in Gozzoli's *Procession of the Magi* [1] reveal the devastation being wrought by these quarries, while other sources such as Boccaccio's *Decameron*, indicate that the hills north of Florence were once covered in forests, the memory of whose shady springs is preserved in the names of such local villas as La Fonte, La Fontanella, Font' all'Erta and Il Vivaio.[416]

Determined to restore his adopted landscape to its medieval splendour, Temple Leader bought up local quarries to halt the erosion and purchased local farms to restore the agricultural land.[417] He concentrated primarily, however, on re-foresting the hills. Planting cypresses in the rocky crevices where nothing else would take hold, filling the

[416] Janet Ross, *Old Florence and Modern Tuscany*, J.M. Dent, London, 1904, p. 151.
[417] He also rescued a nearby house which had belonged to the medieval artist Benedetto de Maiano, and turned the neighbouring convent into an olive factory which, today operates as largest organic olive oil factory in the region.

arable areas with indigenous pines, shrubs, and wildflowers, and flooding the quarries to create picturesque pools, he shaped the landscape to resemble that depicted in medieval paintings. Indeed, seeing more greenery than destruction in Gozzoli's painting, Acton suggests Temple Leader's landscape is 'identical with the background of Benozzo Gozzoli's frescoes of the procession of the Magi.'[418]

At the heart of this landscape Temple Leader created the *Giardino della Colonna,* 'garden of the column', whose name celebrates the fact that the quarry at its centre is reputed to have provided the columns for the church of San Lorenzo. Diverting the Mensola stream, famed from Boccaccio's *Decameron,* Temple Leader filled the quarry to create a small lake which he embellished with a crenellated tower [50], a boathouse and pier, and a tiny altar carved into the rock side. He also erected a massive, medieval-style bridge with a two-storey coffee-house beyond [51]. The bridge, coffee-house and tower all carry Temple Leader's crest and whatever whim or indiscretion inspired his sudden departure from England, it did not put off his sovereign who visited while staying at the Villa Il Palmieri near by. On 12 April 1893 the *Illustrated London News* carried a front-cover engraving of Queen Victoria, attended by her faithful Indian servant, sketching the *Giardino della Coloune.* Temple Leader commemorated the event with two large plaques on the coffeehouse wall – one noting the Queen's attendance, the other, his own. Today vandals have destroyed much of the water garden, the tower is defaced and the boathouse has disintegrated but Temple Leader's touch is still evident in a serpentine lily bed at one end of the lake.

Villa Maiano

Temple Leader's first Italian residence, the Villa Maiano, sits in front of the forest he so laboriously created. Built in the early fifteenth century for Bartolomeo degli Alessandri the villa was remodelled repeatedly in its long history, though today it is largely as Temple Leader left it [52]. While respecting Italian traditions, Temple Leader was unable to resist certain English elements, and the combination he created so epitomizes the Anglo-Florentine taste that Visconti used the villa as a setting in his

[418] Acton, *Villas,* p. 170.

autobiographical film *Tea with Mussolini* – which charts the fortunes of a group of Anglo-American women hanging on in Florence during the Second World War. It was also used by James Ivory in his film version of Forster's *A Room with a View* which depicts an earlier community of snobbish but indomitable expatriates.

In 1467 the original structure, having been destroyed by a hurricane, was sold by the owner to pay off his wife's debts. By 1510 the restored villa was in the possession of one of Florence's foremost families, the Pazzis under whose ownership it was the birthplace of the city's most famous saint, Santa Maria Maddalena de Pazzi, who extolled the surrounding countryside as a haven of peace and tranquillity. At the beginning of the eighteenth century when the Pazzi family died out, the villa was acquired by an affluent Siennese textile merchant who added a second storey to reflect his rising status. A century and a half later Temple Leader purchased the property and added – as a viewing platform - the distinctive central turret based on the defensive tower of the city's medieval Signoria [3].[419]

Perched on a hillside, the villa would have been approached, originally, by an avenue, centred on the villa front, the vestiges of which are still discernable in the surrounding olive groves [52]. In the past this avenue would have ascended through the trees to the entrance gate, which still remains in the enclosing wall, providing a view over the slopes below. To make a front lawn Temple Leader closed off this access, and moved the main entrance to the side of the villa, then terraced the steeply falling land in front to create two levels. The upper terrace, built on a reservoir, follows the Renaissance tradition in having an open space in front to balance the solid mass of the architecture. Instead of the traditional Italian gravel terrace however, Temple Leader established an English lawn, flanked, on the east, with almond trees to provide verticality and shade. A Chinoiserie pavilion to the west invites sunset viewing while the lawn itself is bisected by gravel paths. The ancient wellhead which predates this formal conceit is now stranded beside the path which would originally have been the entrance avenue.

[419] Temple Leader built the private chapel built for his wife, Maria Luisa Raimondi, whom he married late in life.

Having carefully restored the well to reveal the inscribed coats of arms of earlier owners, Temple Leader added his own crest, linking himself to the venerable lineage of the villa. Along the bottom of the lawn Temple Leader placed a stone terrace jutting out over the hillside to take advantage of the spectacular views; to the side, abutting an old *limonaia*, he allowed himself the novel luxury of a small swimming pool which looks rather like an agricultural tank and doesn't stand out too obviously.[420]

The lower garden, accessed by the original entrance ramp, is more conventionally Italian in style, with gravel paths, box edged beds and potted citruses; there is also a nineteenth-century glass and iron lean-to placed against the buttressing wall. Photos in the villa archive indicate that in Temple Leader's time this terrace was a vibrant clutter with colourful flowers filling the beds and pots of every size and shape filled with all manner of plants from mundane geraniums to rare exotics crowding every available surface.

When Temple Leader died without heirs in 1903, the villa was purchased from his nephew, Lord Westbury, by a local family. Though all the subsequent owners have been Italian, they have all respected Temple Leader's Anglo-Florentine additions. Today the villa is owned by Contessa Lucrezia Corsini Miari Fulcis who maintains the property by renting it out for courses, weddings and other events. While she has preserved Temple Leader's alterations to the upper terrace, retaining the lawn, pavilion, viewing terrace and pool, she has restored a more authentically Italian air to the lower terrace by removing the clusters of pots, filling the parterres with grass and planting the flower beds with a sober, monochrome ribbon of irises. Nonetheless, Temple Leader's roses still clamber over the tall, surrounding walls.

[420] Temple Leader's passion for water is demonstrated in the villa's archives which contain several photographs of himself and his friends bathing in the glacial waters of the quarry pools.

Castello di Vincigliata

Like many born during the Industrial Revolution, Temple Leader followed the Pre-Raphaelites in his love of medieval culture. Exploring an earlier Anglo-Florentine connection he wrote a book about the fourteenth century *condottiere* Sir John Hawkwood.[421] While he shared neither the humble birth nor the public adulation of his protagonist, he must have felt some empathy with Hawkwood's marrying a local woman and committing himself to Florence. Ten years after purchasing the Villa Maiano, Temple Leader undertook his second major architectural restoration, the medieval Castello di Vincigliata, which had, reputedly been sacked by Hawkwood himself.[422]

In 1855 Temple Leader purchased the ruins looming to the east in a romantic climax to the hanging woodland he created above his Villa Maiano [53]. As Ross recounts, the castle's owners were the Usimbardi, friends of Dante. After being sacked by Hawkwood in the service of Pisa, the castle was rebuilt in 1368 by Nicolo degli Alessandri whose granddaughter later married Giovanni de Medici. After the fall of the Republic, the Alessandri's power waned and the villa fell into disrepair. By 1637 the owner, who cared only for hunting, was reduced to living in a corner of the castle with his young son and an ancient aunt; several years later the youth and his page were the soul inhabitants, and by 1751 the local church registry recorded: 'No one lives in the ruined palace of the Signori Alessandri, but holy water is still sprinkled in the empty rooms when Easter comes round.'[423]

Though often billed as a restoration, Temple Leader's efforts at Vincigliata amount to a recreation [10]. Henry James wryly noted 'Vincigliata is a product of the millions, the

[421] The son of an Essex tanner, Hawkwood rose through the English army to be knighted for his services in the Hundred Year War. He then formed a company of soldiers and fought on various sides in Italy's various fourteenth century wars. After marrying a local woman he spent the final decades of his life serving the city-state of Florence.
[422] Janet Ross, *Old Florence and Modern Tuscany*, J.M. Dent, London, 1904, p. 156.
[423] Ibid., p. 157.

leisure and the eccentricity... of an English Gentleman.'[424] Though planned with the help of a young Florentine architect, Giuseppe Francelli, it appears that Temple Leader was the imaginative force behind the design as Acton reports that Francelli was 'the faithful interpreter of the cultured and studious gentleman's wishes' and adds that the architect died prematurely in 1867, long before the project was complete.

Vincigliata has no precedent in Tuscan architecture. Its turrets, grotesques, coats of arms, iron braziers and instruments of torture, exhibit, as Acton suggests, 'the picturesque quality of a stage setting for a romantic opera'.[425] Nonetheless, in recreating Vincigliata, Temple Leader preserved ancient crafts by employed local stone masons, carpenters, sculptors and glassmakers. Further, in 1865 when large parts of the city were demolished to make way for urban expansion, he rescued many of the architectural relics which were later incorporated into this, and other of his properties. While today such opportunism would be considered cultural theft, if Temple Leader hadn't purchased them the artifacts would have been lost forever.

In creating a garden for his medieval fantasy, Temple Leader was equally inventive. While a real medieval garden would have been a smelly enclosure of donkeys, cows, scratching fowl, a few vegetables, fruit trees and perhaps a patch of cereal, Temple Leader created a romantic interpretation of the medieval garden, combining colourful flowers and picturesque architectural relics within a simple formal framework. The castle is accessed through massive wooden gates in a deep stone wall [54]. Rising up a cobbled ramp the castle gate, guarded by stone lions, opens onto a small grass lawn. Temple Leader softened the enclosing walls in the English fashion, with climbing roses, and embellished the lawn with box-edged ribbons of yet more roses. In a more sober, renaissance style, he provided a central, circular fountain enclosed by hedges punctuated with topiary cones and gravel paths flanked with potted citrus trees. The castle itself is built round an austere courtyard; though this is, appropriately enough, devoid of greenery, Temple Leader could not resist embellishing the space with a

[424] Ibid., p. 283.
[425] Acton, *Villas*, p. 170.

central well sporting a dramatic dragon-held pulley which owes more to Gothic fantasy than any local tradition. From this sober space a steep stone staircase rises to a stone parapet which offers magnificent views of the surrounding woodlands, which Temple Leader himself created, with Florence glittering in the distance [55].

Abutting the lawn is another piece of English eccentricity in the form of a sunken cloister which Temple Leader designed, complete with frescoes of historical scenes from the lives of the castle's earlier owners. Though the only surviving image depicts Uglino de Visdomini invoking the Virgin before setting off to fight the Sienese, one wonders what gallant scene Temple Leader commissioned from his own life, since he carefully insinuated his own image throughout the estate, embellishing the farms with his coat of arms and incorporating into the castle wall a terracotta plaque, in the style of Della Robbia, showing the Virgin against the coats of arms of Sir John and his wife.

Even when it was furnished and inhabited by his wife's family, Temple Leader's castle continued to exude a powerful presence. In 1913, from his villa in San Domenic below, Lucas, noted 'the July sun may shine upon it and drench its outer walls and towers with golden light, but it cannot soften the expression of forbidding sternness and hostility stamped deeply on the haggard face of that feudal stronghold.' Speaking of it's vague but malign force, he suggests that 'battle, murder and sudden death make up the grim tradition of the grey old castle' and 'not even the remodelling the castle underwent fifty years ago can exorcize its evil character'– an unwitting tribute to Temple Leader's imaginative act of recreation.[426]

Acton notes the irony that Temple Leader, having been a radical member of parliament, spend so much of his time and money recreating a feudal atmosphere; he also points out that despite Temple Leader's magnificent planting of the hillside, 'unfortunately he set a fashion for building villas in pseudo-medieval style' adding, 'these are less offensive than the prefabricated cottages of today.'[427] Early in the twentieth century Vincigliata

[426] Lucas, p. 46.
[427] Acton, *Villas*, p. 179.

was separated from the rest of the estate, probably after Temple Leader's death. For many years after the war it languished, uninhabited, but recently, like so many properties restored or recreated by the Anglo-Florentines, has been turned into a commercial venue, rented out for exclusive wedding parties and private receptions. It has, however, been spared the indignity of a swimming pool, though it is hard to imagine where one could fit a pool in the steep, jagged site.

With his faux medieval gardens and his fantasy castle Temple Leader reflects the early Anglo-Florentine preoccupation with romance over scholarship; his heroic restoring of the barren hillside reveals an extraordinary affection for the Tuscan countryside. Acton notes: 'we are indebted to him for replanting the hills with trees and protecting the landscape.'[428] Remarkably however, though his *Bosco di Vincigliata* is now a public park overseen by the commune of Fiesole, Temple Leader himself has been forgotten. As so often occurs in the annals of Anglo-Florentine history, the local literature makes no acknowledgement of the eccentric English aristocrat who created their prized woodland just over a century ago.[429]

[428] Acton, *Villas*, p. 170.
[429] Happily Temple Leader himself is immortalized in the façade of the Duomo, where a sculptor restoring the statuary used Temple Leader's face as the image of St Calisto.

X. A Virgilian Fantasy: Janet Ross's Poggio Gherardo

Although she had no garden to speak of, Janet Ross was one of the first, and one of the most influential of the Anglo-Florentine community. For over half a century she presided from her medieval hilltop fortress Poggio Gherardo - *poggio* meaning a hill, Gherardo, presumably, the name of an earlier owner. Surrounded by vineyards, olive groves, vegetable gardens, fruit trees and ilex woods, Poggio exemplified the *villa rustica* described in classical Roman treatises. Virgil was seldom far from her thoughts and his *Georgics* informed her working practice. Indeed Ross cast her own life, and by association the life of the Anglo-Florentine community, as a pastoral idyll. While many photographs of the time depict teas, balls and garden parties, Ross's photograph album, preserved in the British Institute in Florence, offers a poignant catalogue of hay fields, harvests, country lanes, peasant farmers, boisterous dogs and statuesque, lake-eyed oxen.

Born in 1842, the daughter of the famous traveller, Lucie Duff Gordon, Ross was destined for a less than ordinary life. Painted by *'il Signor'* – G.F. Watts, she had rejected George Meredith as an early suitor though into her dotage she still referred to him as 'my poet'.[430] Instead she had married an older banker, Henry Ross, and lived with him in Damascus.[431] In the 1860s Ross acted, briefly, as Egypt correspondent for *The Times*, before moving on to Florence where she consolidated her literary reputation while her husband bred rare orchids and raised guinea pigs which followed behind him in a faithful train.

Unlike most of her cohort, Ross had little interest in gardening. Her crenellated fortress stood at the top of the hill [**56**]; a simple stone terrace to the east had marble banquettes shaded by a grape-strewn pergola evoking the outdoor dining spaces depicted in Roman mosaics. Contemporary photographs show that the terrace was enclosed a simple metal fence - rather than the usual stone balustrade – suggesting a lack of interest, finances or

[430] Origo, *Images*, p. 130.
[431] Premble, p. 79.

both. Beyond the terrace were cages where Ross kept her wild birds and a large sheepdog. Beyond these were the pens for the pheasants, wild boar and rabbits she kept for the table. A gravel parterre traverses the villa front and a vine covered pergola flanked with lilies provided a shady path from the villa to the south gate [57]- a stately semi-circular entrance with elegant double gate-posts topped with busts of the four seasons [58].

The vehicular approach from this gate was a long, winding, half-mile drive planted with purple-leaved *Prunus pissardii*, a handsome, freely fruiting tree which was praised by the *Gardener's Chronicle* in 1912 as 'interesting both from an ornamental and a utilitarian standpoint'.[432] Less utilitarian were the hedges of red roses and the stream of blue irises which under-planted these trees.

Unusual for an Anglo-Florentine estate, Ross's grounds contained neither Italian parterres, nor English borders; indeed Ross confined her embellishment to a few low-maintenance flowering shrubs such as oleander and syringa, with terracotta pots of hydrangeas, plumbago and lemon trees adorning the gravel terrace. Nonetheless the *Gardener's Chronicle* asserted that 'roses luxuriate everywhere... on pergolas and arches, fences tree trunks and walls, forming a wealth of floral tracery'; it also notes the wisteria grows as such a pace it threatens to pull down the terrace staircase.[433]

Revealing a typically Victorian passion for dendrology, Ross's husband, Henry, planted the barren hillside between his villa an the public road to resemble the landscape described in Boccaccio's fourteenth-century *Decameron*: 'a small hill that was agreeable to behold for its abundance of shrubs and trees, all bedecked in green leaves'.[434] Unlike his neighbour Temple Leader, however, Henry was not attempting to create a natural-looking woodland; indeed his arboreal collection included such rare specimens as Camphor, Eucalyptus, *Melia Azedarach* with panicles of purple flowers,

---

[432] *Gardener's Chronicle*, 11 May 1912, unnamed author, 'An Italian Garden', p. 315.
[433] Ibid.
[434] Boccaccio, *Decameron*, tr. G.H. McWilliam, Penguin, London, 1972, p. 19.

Japanese loquats, magnolias, azaleas and moutan peonies, but the highlights of the hillside were his two very fruitful twelve foot high Japanese Kaki trees.[435]

The most notable horticultural feature however, was the five glasshouses Henry built to house his famous orchid collection; these had long central lily pools filled with the Burmese goldfish he had brought back from China during the Boxer Rebellion - descendents of which still graced La Pietra's ponds in the 1970s, though, as Acton noted regretfully, careless breeding over the decades had lost them their elegant rococo tails.[436]

While her husband cultivated his orchids, Ross farmed the estate, entertained a stream of political, cultural and literary luminaries and wrote more than a dozen books on Italian subjects, ranging from cooking through palaces to the Medici. Sparring with the formidable Lee with whom she competed for literary supremacy, Ross claimed of her rival 'such ugliness should be a mortal sin'.[437] Though Mary Berenson adored Ross, Mariano, described her as 'stern and difficult to talk to'.[438]

Among the many women for whom Ross had little time was the eccentric novelist known as Ouida. Though they competed for the affections of a local aristocrat, the antipathy between these two women reached its climax when Ross had one of Ouida's unruly dogs punished for biting her son. Ouida retaliated by creating an unflattering portrait of Ross in her 1878 roman a clef *Friendship*. Here in the guise of Lady Joan Challoner, Ross is presented as a snobbish, greedy, manipulative adulteress whose accommodating husband colludes in her schemes to sell fake antiquities to gullible tourists. Since Ouida presented the expatriate community as idle, ignorant and hypocritical, her book was denounced and she, not surprisingly, was ostracized.

---

[435] An earlier journalist had noted the fruit was the size of a Jaffa orange and 'of a glorious colour' and explaining to readers that like medlars, the Kaki fruit must stand in a warm dark room till it is soft before eating. *Gardener's Chronicle* 3 Dec, 1898, p. 397.
[436] Acton, *Villas*, p. 11.
[437] Moorehead, p. 28.
[438] Mariano, p. 18. Mariano also reports that Berenson himself found Ross's authoritative manner 'a little oppressive'and her complete lack of subtlety 'rather trying'.

Nonetheless, her portrait can not be wholly inaccurate as Acton reports that in 1902 a rival authoress wrote of Ross:

> She no longer traffics in 'Murillos' and 'Peruginos' with the names of these painters inscribed in large gold letters on their frames – all to be sold for the benefit of distressed Italian families – but has turned her attention to pastoral pursuits, and places her oil and wine on the English market, no doubt as much to the advantage of her customers as to her own, which could hardly be said of the old line of business.[439]

Ouida depicts Ross's 'pastoral pursuits' as the slow transformation by the ruthless Lady Challoner of her Italian lover's ancestral villa into an Edwardian country house. Arriving with packets of English seeds, she 'cut walks, levelled trees, made the garden a fair imitation of the gravelled parallelograms of South Kensington.'[440] Antagonizing tenants she erects fences, imports English sheep, pigs and chickens, plants English fruit trees, shoots nightingales for sport, replaces picturesque farm buildings with modern breeding-pens and fills the glassed-in loggia with the hot-house exotics known at the time as 'stove-plants'.[441] While this grotesque portrait doubtless describes the cumulative heresies of many Anglo-Florentines, it seems to bear very little on Ross. As one who preferred Paris gowns to Wellington boots and literary salons to vegetable markets Ouida was particularly scathing about her protagonist's hands-on approach to farming:

> She dug and planted, and bought and sold, and planned and bargained; she kept a sharp eye on the weights and measures, she ran up model sties and breeding-pens; she got up at five to count the potatoes and melons, the cherries and cabbages that went to the market; she rode (her lover's) horses, and ordered his bailiffs and strode about in grey linen and big boots, and did on the whole most admirably – for herself.[442]

Through such efforts the real life Ross did manage to support a staff of nine and maintain a large villa stuffed with books and antique paintings.[443] She did, however,

---

[439] Acton, p. 11.
[440] Ouida, *Friendship*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1914 (orig. pub 1878), p. 91.
[441] Ibid., p. 94.
[442] Ibid.
[443] As early as 1902, Graham complained that in the past thirty years prices in Italy has increased immensely, nonetheless compared to England, the cost of living remained appealing until after the First World War. Labour was so cheap that Ross who could not afford to escape the Florentine summers or return to England during the war, she could afford to employ an outdoor staff consisting of Nemo the

conduct her affairs in a rather more picturesque fashion that Ouida suggests. Ross ran her farm on the *mezzaderia* system with *contadini* providing the labour and sharing the produce. Though she had no urban household to feed, her estate did provide enough produce for her own family and that of her three tenant farmers, with a surplus to sell in the local market.

One of Ross's many claims to distinction among her contemporaries was her contention that her villa featured in Boccaccio's *Decameron.* Even if one accepts the notion that Boccaccio was inspired by real settings, Il Palmieri further down the hill, is a more likely source; Poggio's dour crenellations suggest more defensive fortress than elegant palace. Furthermore, it has neither the spacious courtyard nor the elegant loggias of Boccaccio's description.

Though most of her peers happily accepted Ross' attribution, it appears to be little more than a fantasy to give her villa as illustrious a history as that of the nearby Anglo-Florentine estates Vincigliata and Il Palmieri. She also, rather fancifully promoted the idea that her villa had been ransacked by Hawkwood. Whatever Poggio's true history, its ancient profile, woodland walks and terrace overlooking the city, were an inspiration to the community. As, indeed, was its owner. Ross's love of local custom and lore and her study of the ancients shaped the Anglo-Florentine approach to their host country. Soon after arriving in Florence Berenson lived at Poggio with Ross while his villa, I Tatti, was being rebuilt – a project made possible by a loan from Ross. Though he was never one to acknowledge mentors, this time with Ross must have influenced the impressionable youth, who, like his hostess, was later to supplement his income by dealing, subtly, in old masters.

---

coachman, Baldassare the cellarman, Beppe the gardener and his wife the lodge keeper, Paganelli the odd job man who used to bring the ice for the cold-store, and Pietrino, the under-gardener who supplied the stoves, fireplaces and boilers with wood, and cared for Ross's birds. Her indoor staff consisted of Davide, the household steward who oversaw the bottling of her exclusive vermouth, Agostino, the cook and Paolina, the lady's maid, laundress and seamstress. Sadly, after her death her heirs discovered that Davide had been siphoning off her vermouth and selling it, under his own label, in exclusive Florence shops.

In a community of fey intellectuals Ross was both robust and scholarly. While many found her abrupt and forbidding, others were enchanted: Harold Nicholson described her, approvingly, as 'a fierce old thing', while the English painter William Rothenstein exclaimed: 'A proud manner distinguished her, and courage, with a wide experience in the world. And how handsome she still was! And what a splendid villa was here!... and what a garden, and what a table she kept!'[444]

Throughout the First World War, while many of her fellow Anglo-Florentines fled to the safety of their homelands, septuagenarian Ross remained at Poggio, sharing the requisitioned villa with Italian officers, overseeing the welfare of her staff, protecting her farms and sending news to Mary Berenson waiting anxiously in England In 1927, at the age of eighty-five, she died. Having settled in Italy when Florence was the capital of the newly unified Kingdom, she died just in time to avoid the spectacle of Mussolini stirring up his black-shirts. Towards the end of her life, on learning that her son had run up huge bills on the prospect of inheriting Poggio, Ross changed her will. To ensure that her property would not be sold to pay off debts she left the estate to her grand nephew, John, with a life-interest to her niece, his mother, Lina Waterfield.[445] Having braved her aunt's disapproval to marry the English painter Aubrey Waterfield, Lina retreated with her husband to la Fortezza della Brunella, a moated, medieval fortress at Aulla in the Lunigiana region of north-western Tuscany [59]. Ross' steward declared it, 'a place not fit for Christians', while the local villagers believed it was haunted by the garrison which had been massacred there in the eighteenth century.[446] Undeterred, the Waterfields restored the castle, creating an extraordinary 'sky garden' on the roof [60].[447]

---

[444] Moorehead, p. 70; p. 27.

[445] In an effort to delay inheritance taxes Ross willed the estate to the Waterfield's son, John, who then predeceased his mother leaving her no option but to sell the estate to pay the death duties.

[446] Beevor, p. 13

[447] Beevor, p. 15. With sixteen foot wide walls supporting the fortress and a deep layer of earth used by the Spanish garrison in the eighteenth century to absorb the kick from their canons, Waterfield had fixed a primitive pulley to one of the square towers and, with the help of the local builder, Ulysse, had hauled wicker baskets of earth, fertiliser and plants, creating, an ilex avenue, a vine-clad pergola, a rosemary hedge and box parterres filled with flowers. The focal point was a rose-covered, white trellised *tempietto* with a grand cupola recalling the dome of the Brighton pavilion. A square marble lily pond framed a magnificent view of the Carrara Mountains with the sea beyond. The fortress was compulsorily

Though Aubrey Waterfield achieved little success as a painter, his fortress paradise inspired Mary Berenson to ask him to design her garden at I Tatti, an invitation which she had already extended to Pinsent and Scott. After some diplomatic machinations, it was decided that Pinsent and Scott would oversee the formal garden, leaving the wild meadow to Waterfield.[448]

On Ross's death, the Waterfields left Aulla, reluctantly, and moved to Poggio Gherardo to manage the estate. Like her guardian, Lina Waterfield was both a journalist and writer, acting as the Italian correspondent for The Observer from 1921-39, and producing such books as *The Story of Assisi* and *The Concise and Practical Guide to Rome.*[449] In their effort to pay the taxes on Poggio, the Waterfields turned the villa into a 'finishing school' for English girls. The upstairs rooms were transformed into dorms holding between ten and seventeen borders, a friend from the local university was pressed to teach Italian language and literature, Lina herself taught Italian history and Aubrey taught drawing and painting. Berenson agreed to open his library to the students and Beevor, the Waterfield's daughter, recently graduated from school in England, obtained a driving licence to chauffer their charges to sites of interest.

The school was reasonably successful in the early years, but by the mid-1930s, with the rise in Fascism, English parents became increasingly uneasy about sending their daughters to Italy. Typically oblivious to the political situation, and reluctant to leave despite the warnings of impending war, the Waterfields nearly did not make it out of Italy in 1939. When friends in the British embassy warned them that Italy was entering the war on the axis side they spent a dangerous few months detouring through Spain and France to get to safety in England.

---

purchased after the Second World War; after an inadequate restoration, the government demolished it. The only record of this extraordinary horticultural fantasy is in Beevor's memoirs and Ross' archives at the British Institute in Florence.

[448] Beevor, p. 5.

[449] Before they took over Poggio the Waterfields were familiar figures in the Anglo-Florentine community; Lina had been a founder of the British Institute in 1917, while Aubrey had enjoyed the approval of Vernon Lee who wrote the gallery notes for his 1927 watercolour exhibition. Gunn p. 224.

Like many large estates in the region Poggio was requisitioned, first by a prominent Fascist called Signor Morelli, and later by American troops. When he retreated with the Germans, Morelli took everything of value, including letters from DH Lawrence and Lucie Duff Gordon. Though considerably more respectful, the Americans who then inhabited the villa covered one of the eighteenth-century frescoes with white paint to create a movie screen, assuming that the owners would want to 'redecorate' after the war.[450] A great deal of damage was also done by the British soldiers who followed the Americans. On finding a signed photo of Mussolini dedicated 'to my devoted friend' they assumed that the owners had been Fascist sympathizers until local villagers convinced them that the photo must have been left over from Morelli.[451]

The post-war scarcity of materials meant repairs at Poggio, as elsewhere, were delayed. During the war most of the vines had died through neglect, though remarkably, only thirty of the seven hundred olive trees had been destroyed, and those were largely lost in artillery duels across the Arno valley. More dispiriting however, Morelli had dug up and sold the several thousand irises which lined the drive – their roots being a valuable ingredient in perfume and soap. In the early post-war years food was in short supply; even on the farms produce was requisitioned by regional authorities for distribution in the cities. Although her husband had died in England during the war, the septuagenarian Lina Waterfield returned to Poggio, determined to restore the estate. By 1946 farmers were allowed to keep more of their produce with only a kilo of oil per olive tree being requisitioned for stockpiles against food shortages. Once again unable to finance the villa, Lina opened it to paying guests where it was particularly appreciated by the English who were still suffering food rationing at home.

Eventually, however, with the premature death of her son to whom Ross had left the estate, Lina was forced to sell Poggio. It was purchased by a developer who promised he would not divide up the property, then promptly did, separating the villa and its farms. On one side, the terraced olive slopes have been obliterated by housing

[450] Beevor, p. 198. Happily a preservative form of whitewash had been used, so the frescoes were undamaged and the walls were easily restored.
[451] Beevor, p. 211.

developments. The castle itself was sold to an order of monks who have turned it an orphanage. Today the grounds neglected; the pergola on the east terrace has gone, as have Henry Ross's orchid houses. His carefully planted hillside has reverted to ragged woods which give no hint that rare or prized species once presided, though the occasional splash of colour suggests the offspring of the syringa and oleander which constituted Janet Ross's rudimentary efforts at providing colour and scent. There is no trace of the roses and wisteria which so impressed the *Gardener's Chronicle*, nor is there any trace of the pergolas, arches, fences and walls they threatened overwhelm; indeed the gravel terrace to the front of the villa now functions as a car-park, the lawn to the side is brown and bare, the view to the east is obstructed by modern development and except for a few religious statues scattered among the trees, there is nothing to distinguish the grounds at all. Nonetheless Poggio's crenellated profile still towers, intriguingly, from the road below, and despite Ross's self-consciously Virgilian lifestyle, the fortress continues to evoke the rough turbulence of the Middle Ages – its seventy year Anglo-Florentine phase but a brief interlude in the villa's long history.

XI. Paradise Lost: Villa Palmieri

The Villa Palmieri, in the village of San Domenico just below Fiesole, has the greatest claim to being the place to which Boccaccio's protagonists flee the 1348 plague [21]. Seated 'on an eminence', containing 'a spacious courtyard, loggias and halls', surrounded by 'delectable gardens and meadows', it is hardly surprising that the villa should be associated with Boccaccio's splendid palace.[452]

The gardens in which Boccaccio's youths amuse themselves are a fourteenth-century image of Eden; Boccaccio himself declares:'if any Paradise were constructed on earth, it was inconceivable that it could take any other form, nor could they imagine any way in which the garden's beauty could possibly be enhanced'.[453] The detailed description, given in the third day of the *Decameron*, provided inspiration to generations of garden makers; its particular features – long, spacious walks flanked by rose and jasmine, vine-hung pergolas, central lawn dotted with 'a thousand different kinds of gaily-coloured flowers', citrus trees offering, simultaneously, fruit and flowers, and a central white marble fountain shooting a wondrous water jet – were reproduced in many Anglo-Florentine gardens.[454]

Modern scholars deny that Boccaccio was describing actual places.[455] Nonetheless the English community happily promoted Il Palmieri's association with the novel, especially as several of their members owned the villa at different times. Eberlein, Elgood and Bolton all quote vast swathes of the *Decameron* in their entries on the villa.[456] Bolton even suggested the estate was once owned by Dante's father 'as identified by a contract of sale existing in the archives of Florence and dated 1336'; he too, however, concentrated on Boccaccio, claiming: 'all over this fertile land ... the

---

[452] Boccaccio, p. 21.
[453] Boccaccio, p. 191.
[454] Boccaccio, p. 190.
[455] 'the two locations...exist only in the mind of the author, but that has not prevented commentators, from Renaissance times down to our own, from identifying them as actual places... Theories of that sort, still perpetuated by the modern tourist industry, may safely be discounted' translator's introduction, *Decameron*, Penguin, London, 1972, p. lxxvii.
[456] Eberlein, p. 343-4; Elgood, p. 88.

romancer wandered marrying fiction to reality... it is still possible to identify the scenes in which he laid (his stories).[457]

The Villa Palmieri, as depicted in Botticini's painting *The Assumption of the Virgin* further confuses the issue [29]. Painted circa 1475, more than a century after Boccaccio's description, the villa appears a rather modest dwelling with no apparent garden at all. Nonetheless, in 1454 the estate had been purchased by the Palmieri family whose name supplanted the earlier names of *Schifonoia*, meaning 'banish care', and *Fonte de Tre Visi*, 'Fountain of three faces', both of which suggest it must have been idyllic spot if not, in fact, a garden.[458]

In the 1630s during another of the plagues to which Florence was so vulnerable, the villa was used as a lazaretto, housing the ill. Thereafter it remained uninhabited until 1691 when Palmiero Palmieri enlarged and updated the villa reflecting the pomp and ceremony of the baroque period. Clearly the intervening centuries had brought the family prosperity as Palmieri added the balustraded south terrace, extending outwards to allow the old road to Fiesole to pass beneath it while affording magnificent views of Florence in the distance. He also added the tall front gate posts and the monumental double staircase descending in curving ramps to the lemon garden below.[459] Zocchi's 1744 engraving depicts the lemon garden as an oval parterre with a circular pool, central fountain jet, box-hedged swirls and potted lemon trees [32] - a classic example of Tuscan Baroque horticulture which, along with that of the Villa Gamberaia, might also have inspired Pinsent's early twentieth-century lemon garden at Le Balze [61].

---

[457] Bolton, p. 290. As he is the only English writer to make the connection with Dante, this probably owes more to fantasy than fact.

[458] Masson, p. 99. In Botticini's painting Matteo Palmieri kneels in the foreground - scholar, humanist and friend of Cosimo the Elder, sporting the red, velvet, fur-lined robes of his government office. His wife Niccolosa, faces him, dressed the grey habit of the Benedictine nuns – the order which owned the Florentine church of S Pier Maggiore where the painting was an altarpiece in the Palmieri family chapel. Behind Niccolosa are the estates she brought with her dowry, a scattering of farms on the rolling hills of the Val d'Elsa in southern Tuscany, which contrast with the steeper, less cultivated hills rising up behind her husband. With its three swirling bands of angels and saints the painting is thought to represent Matteo's controversial theological poem *The City of Life*, later condemned as sacrilege by the Inquisition because it depicted angels in human form.

[459] The heavy arched enclosure which supports the upper terrace probably acted as the *limonaia* into which the precious citruses would have been placed during the winter months.

In 1765 the villa first entered the Anglo-Florentine community when it was purchased by George, 3rd Earl Cowper. In 1759 the MP for Hertford took a holiday in Florence from which he never returned. Having fallen in love with a married Florentine, he settled for a young Englishwoman, Miss Hannah Gore.[460] Cowper was a favourite of the local community amongst whom, unlike many of his compatriots, he freely mixed, organizing concerts, contributing to local causes, collecting modern as well as ancient art and joining various learned societies. To his own community he was a source of intrigue; Horace Walpole described him as 'as great a curiosity as any in the Tuscan collection' while the English Ambassador, Sir Horace Mann, noted Cowper's brilliant entertainments in his letters.[461] On his death the estate remained within the British community when Cowper's heirs sold it to a Mary Farhill who later bequeathed it to the Grand Duchess Maria Antonia of Tuscany.

With its rich, romantic history and sylvan setting, it is hardly surprising that the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres would fall in love with the place, purchasing it in 1873 from the Grand Duchess. This Italophile scholar transformed the estate; like Henry Ross at Poggio Gherardo, he planted the hillside behind with exotic trees. More dramatically, he closed the old road to San Domenico which had severed the estate, creating a new road to the east and establishing a grand cypress-lined approach to the north.[462] Not everyone was enthusiastic about these changes; Paget's memoirs recount, 'the scent of oranges and lemons was heavy on the air as we passed the Villa Palmieri, not yet spoilt by the ugly new road which now overlooks the grounds'.[463]

The Crawfords also restored the villa and enlarged the garden, combining what Susan and Joanna Horner described in their *Walks in Florence and its Environs* (London 1884): 'the beauty of an Italian garden with the care and order of an English home.'[464] They introduced the rather grandly named 'cactus walk' - a path lined with agaves, and

[460] Acton, p. 139.
[461] Ibid.
[462] Acton, *Tuscan Villas*, p. 275. Eberlein (p. 344) reports that after the shifting of the road, the Brethren of the Misericordia, who were accustomed to resting on its verge before continuing their steep ascent to Fiesole, were invited to take their ease and refreshment in the new garden by the side gate.
[463] Paget, *Linings*, p. 141
[464] Acton, *Tuscan Villas*, p. 140.

created a parterre below the lemon garden, planted with Victorian fan-shaped beds. Later they added an even lower level to incorporate a tennis court and a swimming pool, flanked by summer house with a loggia overlooking the water. In 1912 Le Blond was less than complimentary about the Crawford's additions, suggesting 'the earlier fine gates and approach, with the house standing out boldly above, is poorly compensated for by the convenient carriage way which lands visitors at the level of the great court'; she also describes the new, lower garden as 'of not very pleasing design. The same may be said of its fountain.'[465]

Though the Crawfords, in typically English fashion, smothered the walls with roses and filled the parterres with bright bedding plants, they appear to have left the lemon garden untouched. Masson attributes the survival of this delightful feature through the three centuries of keen horticulturists, to a frivolous charm 'whose appeal was not lost even on the English romantics of the last century'.[466]

After the Earl's death in 1880 his widow completed the villa's Anglicization when, in 1887, she entertained a fellow widow, Queen Victoria. Recalling the event Graham noted, rather sourly, that many local gardeners were 'temporarily sequestered' in anticipation of the royal visit.[467] During her sojourn the Queen planted a cypress tree which miraculously survived the various blights which decimated Tuscany's cypresses through the twentieth century, and was still alive when Acton wrote about the villa in the 1960s.[468] Clearly enchanted by what she saw, the Queen remained for more than a month. Her friend, Paget, recounts that the *Tramontana* blew throughout the whole of the Queen's visit chasing away much-needed rain. The local folk attributed this misfortune to the royal presence rather than their wanton deforestation, and prayed for the visitor to leave. During the drought 'everyone fell ill through the want of moisture in the air', and Paget herself spent ten francs a day buying water. Remarkably, as the royal train pulled out of the station on 11 April 1893, the precious rains began and

[465] Le Blond, p. 82.
[466] Masson, p. 99.
[467] Graham, p. 55.
[468] Acton, *Tuscan Villas*, p. 140.

continued for a full fortnight.[469] The august visitor returned for a second stay six years later during which time Le Blond reports, she used to take tea in the loggia overlooking the pool.[470]

On Lady Crawford's death in 1907 the villa was purchased by an American, Mr. Ellsworth. Despite her early criticisms, Le Blond reports that Mr. Ellsworth 'has greatly improved the gardens'.[471] Wharton gives Villa Palmieri barely a mention, saying only that it preserves traces of the past in its 'terrace-architecture'.[472] In 1907 Elgood complained that the villa's main loggia had been glazed, a fate which befell many Tuscan loggias under British ownership. While depriving the arcade of its deep shadows, 'an essential part of the architectural scheme', this also undermined the original purpose of the loggia, turning what had been a subtle link between dwelling and garden into a mere room. [473]

Elgood's description of the upper terrace indicates the romantic English taste had overtaken the formal garden: 'wisteria rambles over the balustrade, veiling, but not hiding it beneath its delicate lilac clusters, and later in the season, when the blossom has given place to the tender yellow foliage, the gardener puts out his pots of azalea and carnation, geranium and Paris daisy, with here and there a dark green box-tree as a bit of sober colour.' He also reveals that the lower parterre had magnolias, oleanders and other flowering shrubs 'scattered over its surface' while the grass paths were 'bright with flowers' and the gate piers hidden by 'roses and purple clematis'. [474] This romantic profusion is captured in James Carroll Beckwith's 1910 painting *In the Garden of the Villa Palmieri* [**62**].

In 1919 Bolton described the villa as 'as fascinating a resort as one could wish to find for spring and summer days and nights.' He enumerated its glories in terms which

---

[469] Paget, *Tower*, p. 59-60.
[470] Le Blond, p. 82.
[471] Le Blond, p. 82.
[472] Wharton, *Italian Villas*, p. 57.
[473] Elgood, p. 87.
[474] Ibid., p. 87.

suggest more cottage garden than Tuscan villa, describing the double stairway overgrown with perfumed creepers leading, 'to a flower garden, bordered by a wall in which round openings frame exquisite views. Below, the ground falls into wild and distant walks where irises grow in springtime and such nightingales sing as might have heralded the coming of Pampinea and her goodly company.'[475]

Despite its medieval origins, baroque additions, and English overlay, Eberlein, visiting in 1922, saw the villa as essentially Renaissance.[476] While descrying the polychrome decorations, stucco relief and stone ornamentation of the facade, he expresses 'unqualified admiration' for the balustraded terrace with its distinctive curved ramps descending to the box parterres below.[477] Indeed, he concludes that although it is a mixture of restoration and new creations, 'the whole has been carried out in such perfect sympathy with the old Italian ideals that ... one may well be thankful that this historic spot has fallen into such intelligent and reverent ownership.'[478]

Two years later Jellicoe was less sympathetic, claiming that little remained beyond Palmieri's fine façade, its courtyard and screened loggia, and the great ramps which 'swirl up from the lower forecourt to a terrace overlooking Florence'. A student at London's avant-garde Architectural Association, Jellicoe condemned the lower parterre, tennis lawn and pool as lacking both the grand scale and the simplicity of the original garden from which it was lamentably un-connected. Indeed, these modern accretions so offended Jellicoe's sensibilities that he omitted them completely from his plan of the villa. [479]

---

[475] Bolton, p. 300.
[476] Eberlein, p. 344
[477] Eberlein, p. 346. Eberlein describes this area simply as 'box parterre' suggesting that at this time it was no longer used as a lemon garden, though in his plan several years later Jellicoe depicts the area with potted trees.
[478] Eberlein, p. 347.
[479] One can sympathize with Jellicoe's youthful disgust; despite Eberlein's praise, his photographs depict the walls, gate-piers, staircases and balustrades obscured in greenery, providing an unhappy contrast to the crisply clipped box hedging, while the austere front terrace is adorned with huge palm trees stuffed into grotesque ornamental pots with frothy verdure brimming at their feet.

In 1928 Nichols reported that recent restorations had been undertaken with 'scrupulous care', though she does suggest that 'if cypresses could replace the palms as accents the improvement would be noticeable'.[480] Later she mentions that the curved staircase descends 'to a flowery orchard,' suggesting that the lowest parterre had lost any vestige of formality. More interestingly, she suggests that the fountain basin which the Crawfords put in the late eighteenth century is of Moorish design 'fashionable during the seventeenth century both in Spain and Italy'.[481] This observation recalls Acton's account of the 1914 Persian soiree at the villa to which his parents had gone in costumes designed by Poiret 'from Persian miniatures, and my brother, in an overwhelming turban and puffed-out satin trousers, designed by Brunelleschi, acted as a Moorish page to the Doge's spouse'.[482] With its rich history and sensual setting, the villa satisfied the Edwardian taste for exoticism, inspired, in part, by Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* which was popular in pre-war Europe.

By the 1930s the garden had succumbed to neglect when it was purchased by Myron Taylor, the American ambassador to the Vatican during pontificate of Pius XII. Taylor restored villa to house his art collection and restored the gardens in the modern Italian style pioneered by Pinsent. Here high hedges enclose three box-edged parterres, austerely ornamented with statues, fountains and pools [**63**]. He also reinstated the early Renaissance name, possibly to deter tourists seeking the Villa Palmieri which had so long been associated with Boccaccio's *Decameron.*

In Masson's photograph of 1961 the lemon garden is more densely planted than the Zocchi image of two centuries before, its thin, box-edged beds are planted with exotic lilies [**64**]. Though suggesting more Edwardian exuberance than baroque elegance, the geometry of the original design still shines through. A decade later Acton also offered a photo of the garden; here the crisp symmetries are dwarfed by elephantine banana palms.

---

[480] Nichols, p. 116.
[481] Ibid, p. 245.
[482] Ibid., p. 37

Today the villa is owned by the European University. The swimming pool has been separated from the estate, as have several of the garden buildings. The lemon garden is no longer identifiable as such; the circular pool remains but without the surrounding lemon trees it has rather lost its point. The double ramp is still a commanding presence, though its effect is diminished by the cloak of climbers which now smother it. Despite the vestiges of baroque stonework, the garden has succumbed to a low-maintenance regime and daisy-spotted grass prevails, lending the whole place a rather medieval air. The Crawford's grand, cypress-lined entrance has been cut off and visitors now approach the villa, fittingly enough, along a narrow rural road which recalls that path by which Boccaccio's protagonists travelled seven centuries ago: 'conducted by the musicall notes of sweete singing Nightingales and infinite other pretty Birds beside, riding in a tract not much frequented, but richly abounding with faire hearbes and flowres...' [483]

[483] Eberlein, p. 343.

XII. A Romantic Paradise: Lady Paget's Torre di Bellosguardo

One of the least likely, but most prominent Anglo-Florentine garden makers was the Saxon princess, Walburga Ehrengarde Helena de Hohenthal, known to her friends as Wally, and to history as Walburga, Lady Paget.[484] Despite her Austrian birth, Paget was the unchallenged doyenne of the English expatriate community by virtue of her marriage, in 1860, to Sir Augustus Berkeley Paget, British ambassador, variously, to Copenhagen, Vienna, Rome and Florence and 'greatly her inferior as a human being'.[485]

Unusually, after her husband retired to England in 1887, Paget maintained her own winter residence in Florence.[486] After summering for many years at the Medici villa of Artimino then renting the Villa Caprini in Fiesole for several more years, in 1893 she purchased the medieval Torre di Bellosguardo in Arcetri just south of the city centre.[487] Here Paget retreated from diplomatic and spousal duties, restoring the villa and creating an informal garden around it [65]. Acknowledging that her refusal to accompany her husband through the English season was unconventional, she explained: 'I had wasted so much time in former years in paying visits, and the empty and artificial life which one is obliged to lead was so utterly distasteful to me that I could not make up my mind to go on with it.'[488]

In the eight volumes of her diaries Paget describes the court life of *fin de siècle* Europe, recording deaths, suicides, scandals, intrigues, coups d'états, balls, concerts and visits, revealing through her lively prose the unconscious prejudices of her class. Luhan suggests that Paget settled in Italy because English quarantine laws prevented her from

---

[484] No relation to Violet Paget/Vernon Lee, though Quest-Ritson, among others, makes this mistake.
[485] Luhan, p. 185.
[486] When Sir Augustus was posted as Ambassador to Florence in 1867, the family resided at Palazzo Orlandini in Via de Pecori, retreating in the summer to Villa La Tana at Candeli, Sica,'Florence between the 19th and 20th centuries', *Of Queen's Gardens*, fn. 46, p. 57.
[487] One persistent problem for foreign garden visitors, bemoaned by Bolton in 1919 and still challenging contemporary garden scholars, is the alarming way Italian villas change names - often several times in a century. Equally perplexing is the way certain names, particularly those describing features of the site, are used repeatedly, often in the same region. *Bellosguardo*, for example - 'good view' – names at least one village and several villas, all within a few kilometres of each other south of Florence.
[488] Lady Paget, *In My Tower*, Hutchinson, London, 1924, p. 53.

repatriating the beloved, velvet-brown dachshunds given to her by Elizabeth Barrett Browning's son, Pen.[489] It is unlikely however that this solitary, free-spirit could have settled within the restrictive structures of her own or her husband's communities. In 1893, during a visit to London, she confides to her diary: 'I long for the pure air of my mountain-top, Florence spread out at my feet, and peace around me,' before adding, 'spoke to the Princess of Wales at the Palace Concert.'[490]

A Theosophist, spiritualist, vegetarian and anti-vivisectionist, Paget was happier in the Tuscan countryside than in the finest salon and though her diaries show an understanding of contemporary politics, her passion was her garden. After her husband's death in 1897 Paget retreated increasingly to her villa where she held court, dressed in home-made, Gothic gowns. Though not dependent on the income from her farm, Paget's diaries reveal a sympathetic, if patronizing, concern for the local people. Between visiting villas, attempting to preserve the ancient quarters of Florence, picnicking in the hills and writing her diaries, she spent her days promoting hygiene and endowing children's playgrounds.[491]

Like many expatriates she was fascinated by local customs, delightedly recording such arcane rituals as the *Corpus Domine* procession she came upon one afternoon.[492] While charting the transformation of her stable yard from 'a howling wilderness ravined by drains' to a lavish if casual paradise, her diaries also provide a fascinating portrait of some of the better known gardens of the time.[493]

Paget's response to the gardens reveals an ignorance of horticulture, common within the community at the time. Typically she focuses on the surrounding landscape more than any design, planting, statuary, architectural features or the relationship of villa to gardens and gardens to surrounding countryside. She dismisses the intricate, metaphor-

---

[489] Luhan, p. 178.
[490] Paget, *Tower*, p. 2.
[491] She describes a request by Lee on behalf of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Things, that she present a tribute to their president for saving the Ponte Vecchio. Paget, *Tower*, p. 295
[492] Paget, *Tower*, p. 305.
[493] Ibid., p. 15.

laden Villa Lante as 'a small Versailles embowered in leafy Etrurian shades'.[494] At the Villa Farnese she extols the campagna 'like shot silk', describing the garden mainly in terms of its setting: 'then we went out into the desolate but still beautiful gardens, in which roses of all colours twined around the tall Hermes, which stood in rows along the terrace paths now hiding and then again giving glimpses of the blue Apennines'.[495] She describes the setting of Marlia as 'fresh and green as Switzerland, with rushing streams and tall walnut and chestnut trees,' but barely mentions the gardens except to note the wooded amphitheatre behind the villa and the high fountain in the lawn in front.[496] Of the Villa Cettignale, she merely observes that it stands 'in an amphitheatre of ilex-covered terraces. A fine avenue, with one of the rare Italian ghosts, leads up to it'.[497] Even that perennial favourite, the Villa Gamberaia, Paget describes as 'a dream'; ignoring its formal qualities and reducing its classic baroque design to: 'a most poetic place, so retired and so beautiful'.[498]

In keeping with the austere spirit of her chosen landscape, Paget's horticultural tastes were simple. Dismissing the grand gardens of Italian lakes, she notes 'something meretricious in it all after the sober lines of the Tuscan hills and the sombre tones of the *campagna*.'[499] Deploring the prevailing taste for exotica, she complained, after a visit to the South of France:

> the only flowers I saw were in the gardens of rich people like the Rothschilds who bed out their roses, wisterias and laburnums and put them back into houses for the night... Cannes I think detestable; it is a long string of villas built by millionaires. They all spend enormous sums in keeping up a sub-tropical vegetation, beds of specimen flowers, artificial lawns which have to be re-sown every year. Everything about these gardens reeks of money.[500]

Paget takes another swipe at the Rothschilds in an 1888 letter to her husband: 'Your description of Waddeston is very *galloptious* but the fact of its having been made in twelve years would go much against it with me. I care more for an old lime or beech

---

[494] Paget, *Linings*, p. 205.
[495] Ibid., p. 206.
[496] Ibid., p. 236.
[497] Pager, *Linings*, p. 256.
[498] Ibid., p. 448.
[499] Quest-Ritson, p. 135.
[500] Pager, *Tower*, p. 165.

avenue than for acres of five-hundred-guinea shrubs of all rainbow colours. Anything forced goes against my grain, but Jews like it, because it means money.'[501] Several months later she revised her opinion of Waddeston, if not of Jews, recording in her diary: 'I liked my visit to Waddeston... it DID look so bright and gay and brilliant. The mixture of shrubs is so well arranged; the goldeny yews and golden alders mingling with the other various shades, dark greens, light greens, blue, purple, in short, all the colours of the rainbow have a lovely effect. The agent there told me that he has always one hundred men employed in keeping everything spick and span.'[502]

As Paget's horticultural taste was clearly more romantic than classical, one of her favourite gardens was Villa Rufolo on the Amalfi coast - owned by Mrs. Francis Neville Reid. Describing the place as 'distinctly Arthurian, a mixture of Wagner, Tennyson and the old French Troubadours', she records:

> 'Dim, Norman, Saracenic cloisters with richest tracery almost lost in climbing roses and ivy, surround several courts. Vaults and stairways with flowers clustering all around them lead to mysterious vaulted chambers or oleander-shaded terraces. High walls encircle the gardens on all sides, excepting towards the sea where terraces with fountains, steps and flowers lead down into the orange and olive orchards.'[503]

Despite being eighteen years her junior, Paget was a friend of Queen Victoria having been called on, early in her husband's career, to help arrange the marriage of the Prince of Wales to the daughter of the Danish monarch.[504] Paget was also a friend of William and Evelyn De Morgan and the Burne-Joneses, and it is clearly from them that she derived her horticultural style; indeed Quest-Ritson describes her garden as 'a Burne-Jones garden'.[505]

---

[501] Paget, *Linings*, p. 458.
[502] Ibid., p. 462.
[503] Paget, *Tower*, p. 250.
[504] For two years, before her marriage, Paget had lived in Berlin as lady-in-waiting to Queen Victoria's daughter, Vicky, the Princess Frederick William of Prussia.
[505] Quest-Ritson, p. 116. With its Gothic historicism and love of nature it could be described as a Pre-Raphaelite garden, since it exhibits the 'romantic if unformed medievalism' by which the *Oxford Companion to Art* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1970 p. 923) characterizes that nebulous style.

The medieval tower at the heart of the estate appealed to her taste for the Gothic, having been built at the beginning of the fourteenth century by a Florentine aristocrat, Guido Cavalcanti, whose main claim to fame appears to have been his friendship with Dante [66]. Paget was clearly very proud of this detail as she mentions it repeatedly in her memoirs, as though to balance the association with Boccaccio brandished by her fellow expatriates at I Tatti, Poggio Gherardo and Il Palmieri north of the city.

Like the Villa Capponi nearby, Torre di Bellosguardo began as a defensive tower. Over the centuries, as times became less dangerous, new wings were added and embellished with polychrome decorations, to create what Luhan described as 'a beautiful old villa that she restored and filled with her romantic personality'.[506] In her diaries Paget proudly describes the villa's illustrious owners including the Capponis, Medici and Michelozzi; adding literary fame to its historical credentials she also records that her tower housed Byron's ill-fated lover Claire Clairemont and Shelley's wife Claire, and, with no substantiating evidence, she suggests that it was the inspiration for the tower in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh.*

Romantic, dramatic and self-consciously poetic, Paget frequently evokes artists when describing her garden; she speak of her red roses 'against the Perugino sky', her rose-bower 'like an Alma Tadema', and her grass walks carpeted with buttercups, daisies and deep purple iris 'fit for Fra Angelico's angels to tread'.[507] Her bedroom window, grilled, in the medieval fashion, to deter marauding beasts or brigands, was 'hung with Spanish jessamine'.[508] Though she never describes the garden layout or planting, Paget extols its intoxicating summer scents of lemon, honeysuckle, nicotiana and verbena, describing the garden as 'a posy of flowers... roses, lilies, honeysuckle and poppies of the most unreal size and colour.'[509] Indeed, her diary gives an impression of English

[506] Luhan, p. 144.
[507] Paget, *Tower*, p. 297, 330, 328.
[508] Ibid., p. 165-6.
[509] Ibid., p. 329.

cottagey profusion, exhibiting that 'air of lavish, fairly uncontrived floriferousness' which Patrick Taylor claims epitomizes 'the true cottage spirit' [67].[510]

From the villa a wisteria-clad arch led to the stables, while the surrounding parkland offered magnificent views of the countryside. Paget refers to a chapel garden, and though the accompanying photograph is indistinct, it suggests a shaggy tumble of wild flowers and grasses with greenery climbing up to intertwine with the columns of a first-floor loggia. Other photographs show a tangle of irises and olive trees, and a field sprinkled with wild-flowers. Though the centre of Florence was only a few miles away, Paget emphasized the rural aspect of her estate. Indeed, of Queen Victoria's tea-time visit on Good Friday 1893, Paget recounts simply that they took 'a quiet stroll in the *podere*', suggesting that the farmyard was the main horticultural feature.[511]

Advancing age and impeccable class notwithstanding, Paget, like a true Englishwoman delighted in digging in the dirt. Rising at dawn, she would go straight to the garden: 'I lop off the branches myself, dig and do all the other things'; 'I have been working at this house and garden incessantly for the last two months. Painting, digging, making roads, furnishing. I don't think there is anything I have not turned my hand do. I have even broken stones.' Equally eccentrically, she expected her guests to take their turn, noting of Lord Lamington, who had been recently appointed Governor of Queensland: 'Wallace is excellent, simple and true; he weeded a great many baskets of groundsel'.[512]

Despite her rather fey, privileged lifestyle, Paget was one of the few expatriates to question the effect of her presence on the host country. In 1913, amid rumours of impending war, Paget sold the villa and returned to England. In 1924, writing the prelude to her memoirs, she noted: 'When I first came to Italy in the later sixties there was much of the ancient simplicity, sobriety and love of work and beauty in the nation'. Returning ten years later she was struck by the degradation to which the country had sunk, a state she attributes to 'the great influx of foreigners', whose money brought

[510] Patrick Taylor (ed.) *Oxford Companion to Gardens*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, p. 125.
[511] Paget, *Tower*, p. 59.
[512] Paget, *Tower*, p. 59.

materialism while destroying the native austerity and gaiety.[513] Such soul-searching was rare within the expatriate community.

In 1929, while dozing by the fire in her house at Unlawater House in Newnham-on-Severn, Paget's newspaper caught fire. Her butler managed to rip off her skirts before she was burned, but the nonagenarian died in hospital several hours later. The event was recorded in *Time* magazine, a measure of Paget's international esteem.

In 1913 Paget's beloved Bellosguardo was bought by the Baroness Marion Horstein, grandmother to the present owners. A spirited cosmopolitan separated from her husband, the Baroness, like Paget, lived alone in the villa. When her fortunes were devastated by the war, she maintained the estate by taking in paying guests. During the Second World War the villa was occupied briefly by Rupert, Crown Prince of Bavaria, successor to the Jacobite throne, when he was exiled by the Germans. It was later taken over by the local German command, and later still, by the Allies.

In the 1950s when taxes and wages made it impossible to maintain it as a private residence the estate was rented out to American schools, among them the prestigious women's art's college Sarah Lawrence. In the 1970s the younger Franchettis who had been working in advertising in America, returned to their native Italy and took over the estate, turning it into the exclusive country-house hotel, which it remains today.

Not surprisingly the *podere* has gone, though the neat lawn now extending from the tower to the entrance gate is probably where the old farm buildings originally sat, not least because this is the only piece of land flat enough to have held them [11].[514] Paget's tangled profusion of flowers has been regimented into several neat flower borders while clipped hedges delineating the lawn impose an order which seems antithetical to Paget's free-spirited approach. A lower garden terrace has been carved from the surrounding olive grove, and into this a swimming pool has been discretely

[513] Ibid., p. x.
[514] Traditionally, as at Acton's La Pietra, Berenson's I Tatti and Luhan's Villa Curonia, the *podere* was, indeed, found by the entrance gate.

inserted. The walled courtyard off the glazed loggia is austerely embellished with a few potted citrus; one imagines in Paget's day its walls would have been smothered in scented roses and jasmine. Nonetheless, while Bellosguardo, today, is undoubtedly more formal and ordered than it was in Paget's time, it still preserves its ancient air, and the views down to the city appear to have not changed in five hundred years as olive terraces sweep down to the domes and spires of Florence below

Sadly, Lady Paget gets no mention in the glossy brochures which litter the foyer or the many articles about the villa and its illustrious past which fill the hotel scrapbook. As so often happens, the industrious Anglo-Florentines who discovered and restored the decaying villas are written out of their subsequent histories, and Paget is simply one more victim of this unfortunate phenomenon.

XIII. A Taste for Exotica: Sir Frederick Stibbert's Villa

Florentine ornament, Victorian eclecticism, plus the restless peregrinations of acquisitive exiles created a taste for exotica among the early expatriates, and nobody embodies this better than Frederick Stibbert (1838-1906). While Acton filled his villa with Chinoiserie from his years in Peking and Berenson amassed a large collection of oriental art, this taste for the exotic was most evident in the earlier generation. Untainted by the historicism of the later Anglo-Florentines, Stibbert assembled an extraordinary garden rooted in the eighteenth-century English landscape style, embellished with nineteenth-century Gardenesque elements. Though Acton excludes the Villa Stibbert from his Tuscan cannon because of its 'quaint' and 'histrionic-historical' flavour, Stibbert reveals the schizophrenic eclecticism of the early Anglo-Florentines.[515]

Frederick Stibbert was born in Florence where his grandfather retired, having scaled the Colonial Service to become Governor of Bengal only to be shunned on his return to England. Stibbert's father married a Florentine woman and as their only son, he was duly educated at Harrow then Cambridge. While distinguishing himself in Garibaldi's army, Stibbert developed a taste for military paraphernalia. Stoked, perhaps, by colonial nostalgia, he used the family fortune to furnish his fantasies, commissioning agents around the globe to help him acquire the world's finest collection of armour. Neither systematic nor comprehensive, it ranges from Ottoman scimitars through French bayonets to Etruscan helmets and Indian arms.

When his acquisitions spilled beyond his sixteenth-century villa, Stibbert purchased the neighbouring nineteenth-century country house and joined the two buildings to create a sixty-four room mansion equipped with all the features essential to an English country gentleman, including a map room, ball room, billiard room, music room, smoking room and library. Here William Morris wallpaper, Pre-Raphaelite stained glass, oriental porcelains, Murano chandeliers and Flemish tapestries provided a background to his

[515] Acton, p. 269.

collection of Dutch and Early Renaissance paintings. Here too Stibbert housed the armour, arms and costumes that he donned for his celebrated historical re-enactments in which the host himself starred as medieval knight, Egyptian god or Scots laird.

Stibbert's garden evolved was just as capriciously as his villa. Though Acton dismissed it half a century ago, Quest-Ritson hailed the garden as a rare example of a 'middle-class Victorian landscape garden' and 'a fascinating amalgam of different traditions'.[516] Though largely neglected through the twentieth century, the garden remains much as it was in Stibbert's day. Latham, visiting in 1905 records: 'driving up the slopes, the attention is caught every moment by some interesting piece of stonework... here is a little shrine of the Renaissance, there a fine old carved well-head'. [517] While the villa is now accessed from above, the parking lot conveys some of the tantalizing eclecticism of the original approach, being flanked by a Moorish pavilion implausibly housing a naked Venus [**68**]. The villa's external walls are ornamented with crests, shields, coats of arms and other archaeological accretions while faded frescoes lie beneath the buttressed balcony of the early-sixteenth-century turret [**69**]. Stibbert's Gothic terrace of thirteenth-century columns round a Venetian well-head has long-since disappeared, but the air of eclectic salvage remains.

The terrace surrounding the villa holds Roman sarcophagi from which parkland descends through open meadow and dense woodland, to the valley below. Here grottos, oil jars, statues and architectural relics litter the landscape; gravel paths meander through bamboo, bananas, palms and other exotica [**70**], while an avenue lined with antique-style busts presents a more traditional Italian touch. At the heart of this assemblage sits a small lake surrounded by cypress, cedars and other gloomy conifers suggesting an interest in fashionable imports. A small island rock hosts a solitary swamp cypress, but the focal point, at the head of the water, is an Egyptian-style temple, guarded by pairs of Theban sphinxes, crouching lions and carved priests, housing an apparently authentic Egyptian priestess mummy [**71**]. Latham concluded his

[516] Quest-Ritson, p. 106.
[517] Latham, p. 130.

report with the observation, 'It is strange to find this priceless collection, the work of forty years, in this secluded villa in its shady garden, and it takes a long visit to exhaust its wonders.'[518] Much the same could be said today.

Stibbert's whimsy was tolerated as English eccentricity and the visiting Queen Victoria happily sketched in his now defunct Gothic terrace. Quest-Ritson reports that on his death, childless and unmarried, Stibbert bequeathed his estate to the British Government in an attempt, perhaps, to gain the recognition denied his grandfather. Latham however reported in 1905 that it was 'an open secret' that Stibbert's villa and collection were to be 'a princely bequest to the municipality'.[519] In any case, one way or another, the estate passed to the city of Florence. The grounds soon acquired the air of dilapidation so beloved of English horticulturists and for many years the British Council held official receptions in their midst.

As this is essentially an urban garden, one cannot help wondering what marvels Stibbert might have created had he been born a generation later and succumbed to the scholarly historicism of Lee, Berenson, Acton and Sitwell. Yet, while Stibbert reveals how ignorant of, and uninterested in, traditional styles many of the early Anglo-Florentines were, his creation is not so different from that quintessential Italian estate, the Villa Borghese. Richard Lassel's 1670s *Voyage Of Italy*, describes the Borghese gardens as containing: 'walks, both open and close, Fish-Ponds, vast Cages for Birds, thickets of Trees, store of Fountains, a Park of Deer, a world of Fruit-trees, Statues of all sizes, Banquetting places, Grotta's, Wetting Sports, and a stately Pallace adorned with many rare statues.. The Wall of the House is overcrusted with a world of Anticallie or old Marble-pieces of antiquity... Entring into the house, I saw divers Rooms full of curiosities...'[520] A sobering revelation that Stibbert's eclectic assemblage is not without precedent in Italian horticulture.

---

[518] Latham, p. 30.
[519] Ibid, p. 30.
[520] Elgood, p. 11.

XIV. A Tuscan Flower Garden: Georgina Graham

'My beautiful Florence! The flower of cities... the very rose of civilization.' [521]

Though it was never identified and has probably long-since disappeared, one of the most intriguing of the Anglo-Florentine projects was the garden created by Georgina Graham in the hills above Florence. While few of the English expatriates could conceive of a garden entirely devoid of flora, many accepted the limitations of the climate and planted their flowers and tender exotics in pots which could be easily watered and moved into shade when necessary. Nichols explained to her readers: 'while the Italian climate makes life in the open so attractive to people it is less favourable to annual and perennial plants. The winters are too cold and the summers too hot to encourage the flowers to bloom and they are never plentiful except in springtime.'[522] Some, however, challenged the existing conditions and bullied the Tuscan earth to bring forth English-style flower gardens. The prime exemplar of this sort of horticultural arrogance is the indomitable Georgina Graham who recorded her experience in her 1902 *In A Tuscan Garden.*

Though Acton condemns Graham as 'naively priggish' and Quest-Ritson describes her as jingoistic and colonial, her book reveals an English response to Italian gardens which was common before Wharton enlightened the public to the flowerless state of classical design.[523] In a chapter entitled, 'Italian Gardens Old and Modern', Graham explains:

> Most of us have come under the spell of the charm of the old gardens... with their groves of cypress and ilex trees, their fountains and their statuary, all recalling the splendour of a bygone past – delightful places in which to dream away the hot hours of the summer afternoon... but none of these are gardens in the English sense of the word, a place in which to plant and cultivate the flowers we love best.[524]

While her contempt for her host country, its customs, climate, horticulture and people is wearing, Graham's love of horticulture is palpable, her energy is prodigious and her garden sounds delightful if misguided. As Graham tantalisingly refuses to divulge the

---

[521] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Notes in England and Italy*, New York, 1875, p. 372.
[522] Nichols, p. 86.
[523] Acton, *Villas*, p. 12; Quest-Ritson, p. 118.
[524] Graham, p. 48.

location of her villa, the only record of her garden is that which she offers in her book with its blurry black-and-white photographs. Though long out of date, a copy is duly lodged at the British Institute where its well-thumbed pages provide a vivid account of a particular form of late nineteenth-century Anglo-Florentine garden-making.

With discretion common to her gender and class Graham published anonymously, and as she does not figure in the other memoirs of the community the only image we have of her is what she reveals in her book. Having settled in Florence in the 1860s she combines Victorian gentility, prudery and xenophobia. Her book begins with a lengthy peroration on the unpredictability of Italian weather then proceeds to challenge the Italian aesthetic, stating: 'old Italian villas, about which so much has been written and the idea of which so much romance clings, are, as a matter of fact, for the most part, gaunt, barren, hideous structures outside, and conspicuous for every kind of inconvenience within.'[525]

Graham sets her story squarely in the Anglo-Florentine tradition, telling of unscrupulous Italian agents promoting all manner of unsuitable properties till one afternoon, walking with her companion - the unnamed, un-gendered 'other' with whom she lives - Graham stumbles across a noble villa, modest but distinguished, languishing at the end of the ubiquitous cypress-lined drive. This is the 'once-upon-a-time' of the Anglo-Florentine experience, and the story proceeds to explain how the author heroically restores the place to its former glory wresting a vibrant garden despite the efforts of wily workers and unscrupulous bureaucrats to thwart her.

In 1878 Henry James observed: 'the villas are innumerable and if you are an aching alien half the talk is about villas'.[526] Indeed so keen were the English to embrace the villa fantasy that businesses were established simply to sell Italian properties to English purchasers; in 1910, when he determined to find an Florentine retreat, Lucas simply

[525] Georgina Graham, *In a Tuscan Garden*, John Lane, London, 1902, p .4.
[526] James, *Italian Hours*, p. 124.

'called on the English house agent' as did Graham several decades before.[527] Later, however, Graham complained:

> In my time... the fashion for English people to inhabit country houses in the neighbourhood of Florence was almost unknown. Here and there an Anglo-Italian settled in Italy for business or other reasons, might own a property on which he would spend a few weeks in summer. But the English in those days had not spread themselves over the face of the land as they have since done.[528]

Graham might well have been attempting to distinguish herself from the vulgar followers of fashion such as George Augustus Sala, the novelist, pornographer and *Daily Telegraph* journalist, who, describing the Florence of the 1860s, revealed: 'English boarding houses elbow Italian *locandas*; English bakers sell you captain's biscuits and pound-cakes; and Dr Broomback's Academy for the Sons of Gentlemen is within twenty minutes' walk of the Pitti Palace.'[529]

In Graham's case the large Medici villa onto which she stumbled had been the country residence of an English Ambassador at the court of the Grand Dukes of Tuscany. To her delight, this august person had placed his coat of arms above the door, cloaked the villa walls in roses and imposed his taste upon the grounds in the form of a large, English-style park with 'beautiful old ilexes and fir trees with splendid conifers, tulip trees and catalpas'.[530] The views evoked the glorious past: 'to the north [was] the old Etruscan mother city', that is, Fiesole, to the east the Valombrosa hills and below was Florence. From the park a side walk led to the garden proper, 'now Alas! in a fearful state of decadence'...as such gardens always were.[531]

Since large expanses of parkland were unusual in Tuscany's hilly terrain, this feature finally seduced Graham. Taking a lease on one of the outbuildings, she employed a Scottish architect to oversee the restoration, adding several stories as well as windows and doors before moving in with her companion, her Scottish maid and a local

---

[527] Lucas, p. 25.
[528] Graham, p. 9.
[529] Premble, p. 41.
[530] Graham, p. 13.
[531] Ibid., p. 13.

housekeeper. Like many affluent Anglo-Florentines, Graham imported domestic staff to shield herself from daily contact with the local people. Apparently unable to entice a cook from the mother country she was forced to hire a local cook, about whom she grumbles throughout her book.[532] Many foreigners were equally in thrall to their employees, unable to function without them, but resentful of the fact. This antagonistic relationship became particularly strained in the 1920s when the Fascists introduced labour laws forbidding foreigners from firing an Italian employee without huge compensation.[533] Such antagonism was not confined to the Fascist era however; in 1897 Lady Paget complains of a servant she had dismissed with the appropriate warning, who demanded three months wages and, when she refused, pressed legal charges against her. The case lasted four months, and although she won, the man disappeared leaving her to pay all the expenses. Paget finishes her account with the observation: 'This is an experience which most foreigners living in Italy will be able to confirm.'[534]

Such petty frustrations, however, were a small price to pay for the beauty of the landscape. Graham's dwelling was shielded to the north, as was the custom of the region, by a dense windbreak of firs. Luhan recounts that these forlorn spaces on the north side of Florentine villas never had flowers, only box hedges and lethal stone paths, though often the windbreaks would be regimented to create a narrowing vista, ending in 'a damp stone bench with a greenish fungus creeping about it'.[535] Graham, however, remained loyal to the English landscape style, planting the meadow beyond with fruit trees, flowering shrubs and wild flowers. These were succeeded by summer-

[532] A century earlier Elizabeth Barrett Browning imported her own maidservant, 'Wilson', who later left to marry an Italian manservant, a common situation as both the Dickens's and Ruskin's lost their domestics to Italian husbands. Intermarriage was also found among the highest classes where impecunious Italian nobles exchanged their titles for large American dowries. Though such stories were recounted by Henry James and Forster, their novels usually illustrate, not the affinities between the two cultures but the misunderstandings which kept them apart. Origo employed a Scottish nanny to look after her children – reflecting perhaps a desire for Celtic discipline rather than any aversion to Latin staff, as she had married an Italian. Acton also had an English nanny who disliked Italy and described the Italians as 'dirty dagoes'. Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 15.
[533] Beevor, p. 133.
[534] Paget, *Tower*, p. 405/6.
[535] Luhan, p. 136.

flowering nasturtiums ranging in colour, she proudly recounts, from the pale La Pearle to the deepest orange-black [72].[536]

The garden itself, lying to the south-east, is where Graham revealed her horticultural prowess. Reached via tall brick piers supporting terra cotta vases, Graham prettied up the entrance, erecting a wooden door to keep out the *contadino* who had created a shortcut past her dwelling, then stringing overhead wires to support roses and jasmine in scented floral arch. Conveniently, the courtyard within was bare earth rather than the usual paving, allowing her to create beds for periwinkles, roses, honeysuckles and violets, which were transferred to pots in autumn to give space for the freesias she required for her winter table.

Laid out in the form of a Latin cross, her garden had a gravel walk lying the length of the house with a cross axis leading to a picturesque trellis-work arbour, surmounted by a huge iron dome and wreathed in Virginia creeper. At the end of the garden stood the 'invaluable' old acacia tree, beneath which she placed her garden chairs amid spring ferns, scillas, snowdrops and yellow primroses which gave way, in summer, to decorative foliage plants and large terra cotta pots of azaleas whose delicate flowers would be shaded by the tree. To the horror of her Italian gardener – 'It was a belbosco signora' - Graham thinned out the shrubbery which formed the south-east boundary to create a deep flower border, beside which she installed a grass walk, 'a better background for shrubs and colour effects than anything else'.[537] Conveying the particularly English look of which she was so proud, this turf was the envy of her compatriots, one of whom, 'the owner of a very superior domain' assured her that her grass walk was worth the whole of his estate, 'glass houses and gardeners included.'[538]

Elsewhere Graham placed potted magnolias against the dining room window to scent her evening meals, removed a fine muscatel grape vine to make space for her *Banksia* roses and planted the villa walls with greenery. While Italians, traditionally, preferred

[536] Graham, p. 30.
[537] Ibid., p. 34.
[538] Ibid., p. 34.

the clean lines of unadorned architecture, their reluctance to cloak their walls in verdure also stemmed from a fear of harbouring snakes and noxious insects. As Luhan explained:

> There were very few vines or creeping things on the walls of the villas. The Italians discourage them on account of minor insects as well as tarantulas and scorpions. No, the walls would come right down clean onto the ground, and usually there was a clear space around them for a path that kept the growing things always at a distance.[539]

Oblivious to this basic fact, Graham complains: 'You never see a creeper of any kind planted against their walls to soften their staring outline, and they have a desolate forlorn look, in contrast to our lovely English houses.'[540]

In time she also planted exotic shrubs in the shelter of her lemon house and added further flower beds, a shrub border and a hedge of Bengal roses running the length of the garden which blossomed spring and autumn with a mass of scented flowers. Beneath the roses she created a wide belt of white pinks and behind it, for spring colour, a double row of four hundred yellow tulips. The far side of the hedge was planted with clumps of Madonna lilies alternating with peonies 'mostly picked up in old gardens here', from which she freely gave shoots to envious friends till her own specimens almost died and she ceased her generosity altogether. The main garden walk lead past the flower beds to a flight of steps, through the garden wall and on to the public road. The proximity of this road caused such consternation to her friends that Graham finally screened it with a bed of shrubs and roses.

Though pleased with the general layout of the garden, Graham averred that she would like to have sacrificed even more of the shrubbery for poppies, larkspurs, delphiniums, lupins and 'suchlike things, in true English fashion'.[541] Despite her relentless Anglicisations, however, Graham's book charts her gradual understanding of Tuscan conditions and methods. Her account is full of incidental detail and astute observation, noting for example, that 'in this country [*pieris japonica*] is grown in balloon fashion,

---

[539] Luhan, p. 135.
[540] Graham, p. 4.
[541] Ibid., p. 44.

trained round and round, and very handsome it looks when a mass of scarlet or pink flowers', extolling the effect of the crocuses planted at the edge of her grass walk: 'I know of nothing among spring flowers that gives the same amount of beauty at so small a cost', and heaping praises on 'Monsieur Guillot of Lyons', the happy supplier who fed her insatiable lust for roses.[542]

As the book proceeds, the author's longing for her homeland becomes increasingly intense; nonetheless, while describing the olive and cypress dotted landscape beyond her garden walls, Graham confesses: 'and sometimes lying in the deck-chair in the fresh cool air of an Italian summer morning, and watching the lights and shadows as they come and go over all this wonderful beauty, one asks oneself: Was there any use in making a garden at all?'[543]

Though her attempt to create an English flower garden in the Florentine hills may have been misguided, Graham's clear appreciation of the Tuscan landscape finally redeems her insular English horticultural approach.[544] And if we subscribe to Masson's view, Graham's focus on flowers is perhaps not so inappropriate. Despite her naivety, priggishness and jingoism, Graham may have come closer to the true classical style than the academic, architecturally-biased male compatriots who succeeded her.

Although Graham gives few clues as to the location of her house, those she does give point to Careggi, it being a Medici villa, sited north of the city and the former dwelling of a British Minister: Lord Holland rented while he was English Ambassador from 1845.[545] Further, to this day the villa is surrounded by a rare, and unusual English-style parkland, the feature which finally convinced Graham to settle there. Today there is no evidence of Graham's house, but it might well have been lost to the post-war development which has encroached on the estate.

---

[542] Ibid., p. 39; 70; 41.
[543] Ibid., p. 75.
[544] Throughout the book Graham also reveals an English fascination with Italian words and phrases. Diligently recording poetic flower names, she notes that oleanders are known as 'mazzi di San Guiseppe' because they tend to flower on that saint's day in June and *rhus cotrinus* is called *nebbia* or clouds.
[545] See Chapter III, Sources and Inspirations, for a further study of Careggi.

XV. A Rural Refuge: Joseph Lucas's Villa in San Domenico

Joseph Lucas's experience of creating a garden in the hills north of the city is a virtual paradigm for the experience of the amateur Anglo-Florentine garden-maker. His villa is never named, and its exact location is unclear, nonetheless his 1913 *Our Villa in Italy* vividly records the joys of early-twentieth-century Anglo-Florentine villa life. The fact that the book went into a second edition in 1919 indicates the popularity of this version of the expatriate experience. Being neither scholar, socialite nor dedicated horticulturist, Lucas does not feature in any of the many biographies of the time; one reason why he never penetrated the community might be because he only lived abroad part-time, retreating to Italy from the British winters but returning home every summer because, as he claims with typical cultural chauvinism: 'an English country house, surrounded by a charming English garden... is the best place out of paradise during the summer months.'[546]

Although Lucas set out to create an authentic Italian garden, his fantasy owes as much to English as to Florentine tastes. From the very beginning his flowery prose reveals an almost irrational passion for Florence: 'the city of the lily cast its spell over us, and we are still fettered in the foils of its witchery and wish to remain so even unto the end'.[547] Seeking to escape the English winters, Lucas and his unnamed wife set out to find an ancient Italian villa with a large garden of 'fine old flourishing trees, casting deep, cool shadows with here and there a sombre cypress, lofty and distinguished, watching like sentinels over the welfare of the household.'[548] His initial wish-list was very precise, including magnolias, camellias, oleanders, lemon-trees, mimosa, a south facing loggia to catch the winter sun, a *podere* in which to grow peaches, pears, figs, plums, apricots and cherries, and the ability to produce his own oil and wine.

Arcadia is never far from the Anglo-Florentine garden, nor is the shadow of the Medici; after discounting various villas as too gloomy, too expensive or too far from Florence,

---

[546] Lucas, p. 11.
[547] Ibid., p. 17.
[548] Ibid., p. 15.

Lucas is finally seduced by a villa in San Domenico because of the imprimatur of the Medici who colonized the area five hundred years before. Lucas evokes Lorenzo and his brilliant circle in the Villa Medici above, Cosimo worshiping at the San Giralamo convent nearby, and Giovanni presiding in the Badia Abbey, just over the hills, till, as Pope Leo X, he created a court of 'pagan luxury, voluptuousness and art'.[549] Fra Angelico, the fifteenth-century painter who lived in the local monastery, and Boccaccio, whose *Decameron* is set in the countryside just below his villa, are also frequently evoked, as is the beauty of the Italian spring, which is described in terms of a Botticelli painting with wildflowers growing 'fiercely, tirelessly, and everywhere', transforming the landscape into 'a garden of gods and a playground of fairies'.[550]

Bewitched by the setting, intrigued by the historical, artistic and literary associations, Lucas agrees to pay ten thousand lira for the fourteenth-century villa and ten surrounding acres [73]. The grounds had to be purchased separately from the tenant farmer who harvested the space as a market garden, while the villa itself had a sitting tenant with a three year lease to run. Nonetheless Lucas found the view from the loggia, crumbling terraces, ancient lemon house and, in particular, the potential to create a garden, worth waiting for.

Stability, security, age and order are the keynotes of the villa as Lucas extols its lichen-stained walls and simple, harmonious façade. Lauding its traditional craftsmanship he constantly compares his ancient dwelling with the shoddy architecture of the present. Indeed the book is, in many ways, a rant against the modern world. Like many English owners, Lucas carefully researched the history of his estate. Founded on the site of an old stone quarry, its earliest known owners were the Buoniusegni from whom a local dyer had purchased it in 1475. Describing the social upheavals of the Renaissance, Lucas claims his villa: 'stood for peace, beyond the range of city life and strife, and the rage of the mob could break itself to pieces before they climbed the hill ... even if

[549] Ibid., p. 20.
[550] Ibid., p. 161;190.

vengeance was burning in their hearts.'[551] The class antagonism which he so vividly evokes probably had a contemporary resonance in the social agitation which was stirring up the working classes in both Italy and England at the time.

Moving onto the nineteenth century Lucas recounts how in 1825 the Palmieri family owned the estate, noting that their vast holdings encompassing the grand Villa Palmieri nearby in which the august Lord Crawford had recently lived. Though he regrets the lack of illustrious predecessors in his own villa, through his historical allusions Lucas still manages to link himself with the local workers, the great Renaissance families and England's nineteenth century expatriate aristocrats.

Early on Lucas hired a man to work the farm on the *mezzadria* system. Though his primary concerns are the villa and garden, Lucas does devote a chapter to the workings of the farm, indicating that 'last year the yield of the podere was a hundred barrels of wine and six barrels of oil', while providing the helpful information that a barrel equals fifty litres or eleven gallons.[552]

For the garden itself Lucas created a simple, formal space, embellished with romantic touches. The sloping site was already divided into two terraces connected by a flight of stone steps, flanked by pillars holding griffons or hounds – their features worn to indecipherability. To reach the garden, visitors stepped from the reception room onto the gravel terrace which was so often found against villas to prevent the growth of shrubs or vines which might harbour snakes and insects. Beyond the terrace was a grass plot – again commonly found in classical Italian design to balance the mass of the building with an equal void. Lucas enlivened this typically Italian austerity with small flower beds 'spotted here and there giving the pleasant relief of colour'; there was also a fir tree which shaded the house and sheltered a stone dining table surrounded by the wicker chairs which Origo identified as typically Anglo-Florentine.[553]

---

[551] Ibid., p. 48.
[552] Ibid., p. 189.
[553] Ibid., p. 138.

Several yards away from Lucas's outdoor dining table stood the precious well, while against the garden wall was the lean-to glasshouse, heated by flues, which produced the early lilies-of-the-valley, calla lilies, white lilac, freesias and twice weekly plates of asparagus, through January and February, of which Lucas was so proud. Beside the glasshouse stood the more substantial stanzone where the potted citrus sheltered from November to April.

Below the upper garden was a lower terrace which had long been used for storing lumber so its stone-edged borders were overgrown and its paved paths uneven. Buying seventy potted lemon trees, two hundred small pot plants and one hundred large pot plants Lucas transformed this area into a more traditionally Italian garden. Unable to find a gardener he convinced Enrico, the tenant farmer, to take the job. Having worked the estate for over two hundred and fifty years, Enrico's family was no longer able to survive; even when reduced to market gardening they found it impossible to compete with cheap imports – a situation which fuelled Lucas's rage against modern industrialization.

While many of his compatriots expressed contempt for local workers Lucas had nothing but praise for Enrico. A forty-year-old bachelor, living in a house in the olive grove with his mother, her niece and a blind brother, Lucas describes his gardener as 'the last of his race' and 'a worthy representative of a clean and honest family of ancient lineage', reinforcing the sense that, for Lucas, the modern world was full of social confusion.[554]

As Enrico repaired the garden paths and reset the stone borders, Lucas designed a large lily pond for the centre of the lower terrace with a fountain rising from it. Though he describes this feature, rather romantically, as a 'vasca' with its echo of ancient stew ponds, in the accompanying photograph it resembles a suburban Edwardian garden. In a similarly English vein, when repairing his large iron entrance gates Lucas was loath to remove the roses which had climbed up the stone piers and smothered the crowning

[554] Ibid., p. 144.

eagles. Instead he designed an iron arch surmounting the gate posts, sweeping clear of the eagles to ensure the survival of both rampant roses and ancient stonework.[555]

With the framework repaired, Lucas turned his attentions to the garden, instructing Enrico to take 1,500 cuttings from ancient box trees and plant them in a ribbon of green around every flower bed and border – a sobering reminder that before the ubiquitous garden centre every plant had to be begged, imported from specialist nurseries or grown from scratch.

Extending the garden to the east to hide the farm buildings Lucas grafted a romantic English layer onto the Italian structure, adding a lilac border with a flanking grass walk, while clothing new rustic stone steps and rockery banks with masses of roses, ranunculi, anemone, narcissus, tulip, iris and other spring-flowering bulbs. He also incorporated spring-flowering shrubs such as the crimson blossomed *cydonia cardinalis* and *kersia japonica* with its golden rosettes. Passing his floral exuberance off as authentic Italian style he claims, rather fancifully, 'an Italian garden is profusion and picturesqueness, but it is not trim and tidy on English lines'.[556]

Lucas epitomises the Anglo-Florentine experience; taking refuge from the modern world by cultivating a garden abroad. The extraordinary consolation he finds in Tuscany's ancient countryside, antique architecture and archaic peasant ways suggest a man in retreat from the world which was, at the time, marching towards a catastrophic war. Even allowing for Edwardian hyperbole, his book is an extended eulogy for lost sureties in the dying days of the Empire.

Sadly, this appears to be Joseph Lucas's only book; it gives no indication of his English identity and the second edition gives no account of the later history of the villa. Today, in the village of San Domenico, just below the Villa Medici, to the side of the monastery and down a narrow road, just as he describes it in 1913, there is a villa

[555] This English love of creeping verdure is also evidence in photos in the book which show the villa's lower storeys engulfed in a rising tide of roses and other greenery.
[556] Ibid., p. 159.

surrounded in vineyards and orchards with a small enclosed garden which resembles the blurred photos in his book [74]. Perhaps, unlike its owner, his beloved fourteenth-century villa did survive the terrible turmoil of the twentieth century.

XVI. Arcadia Recovered: Vernon Lee's Il Palmerino

Although today she is virtually unknown, Vernon Lee (1856-1935) was among the most formidable, and the most formative, of the Anglo-Florentine community, not least because of her rediscovery of the baroque style. Her villa, Il Palmerino, is a small, square, stuccoed building, hidden by high stone walls, tucked away on a steep dirt road at the edge of the village of San Domenico. The house itself abuts the road; to one side a square lawn is carved from the terraced slopes of agricultural land, to the other the stump of an ancient pine tree sits amid scrubby uncultivated ground. Behind the house the stables have been developed into an elegant villino with a gravel terrace in front [44], giving onto a small, formal garden which overlooks the surrounding farmland. Paths meander through the fields which are, today, abandoned, though remnants of stone terracing attests to earlier cultivation. The current owners are developing the villa as a guest house, hoping the reputation of its illustrious forebear will entice visitors to savour the views which sustained her throughout her adult life.

While her garden was rarely mentioned and is, indeed, hardly noteworthy, Lee herself was one of the most influential shapers of Anglo-Florentine horticultural tastes. A waspish blue-stocking, she was born Violet Paget, but adopted the gender-neutral pseudonym to ensure her work would not be dismissed as mere 'women's writing'. Forster might well have been thinking of her when he described the exotic expatriates known to the fictional Mr Eager: 'Living in delicate seclusion, some in furnished flats, others in Renaissance villas on Fiesole's slope, they read, wrote, studied, and exchanged ideas, thus attaining to that intimate knowledge, or rather perception, of Florence which is denied to all who carry in their pockets the coupons of Cook.'[557]
Henry James described Lee as 'the most able mind in Florence', before warning that she was 'dangerous and uncanny as she is intelligent, which is saying a great deal.'[558]
Maurice Baring called her 'by far the cleverest person I have ever met in my life and the

[557] Forster, *Room with a View*, p. 83.
[558] Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee Violet Paget*, Oxford University Press, London, 1964, p. 2. James' early encouragement to the aspiring young writer was repaid by a cruel and thinly disguised portrait of the venerable novelist in one of her early novels.

person possessed of the greatest range of the rarest culture', while Bernard Shaw praised her as 'the noblest Briton of them all'.[559] Within the community Berenson valued her, Ross resented her and Origo was daunted by her.[560] Mariano, Berenson's observed: 'her face, in spite of its snout-like ugliness, was fascinatingly witty and intelligent' [75].[561] Wharton described her as a 'highly cultivated and brilliant woman'. Even Cyril Connolly gave her the dubious distinction of bracketing her with Coleridge, Swinburne, Wilde and Melville as 'mighty-mouthed international geysers'.[562]

Born in Germany in 1856, to an eccentric English mother and a timid French father Lee belongs as much to the nineteenth as to the twentieth century.[563] Though most of her writing was done while Queen Victoria was still on the throne, she was, at heart, a modernist with a precocious interest in psychology and aesthetics. An outspoken pacifist, feminist and anti-vivisectionist, she was fiercely intellectual, prodigiously well educated and extraordinarily versatile, producing travel pieces, poetry, fiction, biography, short stories and plays on subjects ranging through history, politics, religion, philosophy, ethics, music and aesthetics. Marcello Fantoni names Lee, along with Walter Pater and John Addington Symons as the writers who shaped the contemporary English view of post-Renaissance Italy.[564]

Though known as much for her trenchant views and spiky personality as for her extraordinary literary output, Lee is best remembered for her essays; typically these were elegant but often inconsequential ruminations which describe a subject in sensuous detail, drawing in an astonishing range of literary, artistic and historic allusions. While fluent in English, French,German and Italian, publishing in each of these languages, Lee's first love was Italy. Her knowledge of the country was legendary, her villa was an international gathering place, and the presence of this

---

[559] Ibid., p. 2.
[560] Moorehead, p. 41.
[561] Nicky Mariano, *Forty Years with Berenson*, Hamish Hamilton, London 1966, p. 3.
[562] Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise*, Deutsch, London 1938, reissued 1973, p. 107.
[563] An innate restlessness mixed, perhaps, with the fear of social ostrasisation – as a young widow Mrs Paget had married her son's French tutor - led Lee's parents to quit England.
[564] Fantoni, 'Renaissance Republics and principalities in Anglo-American Historiography', *Gli anglo-americani a Firenze*, ed. Marcello Fantoni, Bulzoni Editore, Rome, 2000, p119.

famous intellectual probably inspired many independent women of means to settle in the vicinity.

Where an earlier generation had been attracted to Italy by the romance of its republican struggles, Lee was inspired by its more distant past. To a nation that had spent centuries locked in local battles, Lee helped recover a sense of Italy's history, writing essays on such diverse subjects as eighteenth-century academies, the old Bologna road and Tiberius' villa. Nor could she resist the allure of that Anglo-Florentine favourite, 'Bonnie Prince Charlie' writing a biography of the Countess of Albany, the abused wife of the dissolute Young Pretender.[565] But Lee's greatest facility was her ability to convey the *genius loci*, the spirit of a place, and her chosen place was Tuscany, the love of which imbues her writing.

Like many late nineteenth-century Anglo-Florentines Lee was enchanted with Italy's pagan past. In the 1927 introduction to her Italian stories *For Maurice*, Lee described Italy as 'a land where the past haunted on, with its wizards, sphinxes, strange, weird curious.'[566] This flirtation with the pagan is perhaps a reflection of a post-Darwinian atheism, a search for the divine in a world where God had been displaced but neither Freud nor Marx had yet come along to fill the void. Maurice Baring, after whom Lee's book was named, claimed of its author: 'she had worshipped the Lares and Penates of ancient Italy all her life, and knew the rituals and respect that should be paid to them as well as to the Christian saints who had taken their place.'[567] Long before Sitwell wrote his paean to decaying Renaissance gardens, Lee was divining pagan goddesses in Italy's neglected villas.

After a pattern of winters in Germany and summers in France, Lee's parents discovered the Italian peninsula when the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71 made sojourns in France

---

[565] Vernon Lee, *The Countess of Albany*, WH Allen, London, 1884.
[566] Gunn, p. 46.
[567] Ibid., p. 135.

unwise.[568] They settled permanently in Florence in 1879 to provide a stable home for Lee's half-brother, an aspiring writer whose nebulous illness coincided with the publication of his precocious half-sister's first teenage essays. Settling with the family at 5 via Garibaldi, Lee wrote her books between nursing her brother, enduring her own neurasthenia, fulfilling her filial duties, entertaining guests and spending the summers in England visiting publishers.

In 1889, seeking fresh air, a garden and respite from visitors, Lee convinced her family to leave the city. In the village of San Domenico, just below Fiesole they found Il Palmerino, a square yellow farmhouse nestled among the hedged fields and dusty unpaved lanes, which Tuscans still call 'white roads'[76]. Taking a seventeen year lease on the property, the Pagets proceeded to embellish the house with antiques, carpets, furniture, books, paintings and the usual accoutrements of expatriate life. Despite such embellishments, however, it retained a rustic charm especially in comparison with such elegant villas as the Ross's Poggio Gherardo and Berenson's I Tatti nearby.

Il Palmerino was essentially an urban villa, its front façade abutted the public road, with only a small lawn to the side and the farm buildings directly behind.[569] Archaeological evidence indicates that in Lee's time the lawn was a small formal garden with gravel paths dividing the space into four box parterres round a central fountain. An iron and glass greenhouse at the far edge, probably dating from the late nineteenth century, has a staircase rising to its roof to create a raised belvedere for viewing the countryside and the city of Florence beyond. The stable block, covered in wisteria, is linked to the villa with a stone terrace which was often deployed as an outdoor theatre where Lee would perform excerpts from her own works. An illustration in the villa archives suggests that

[568] The Franco-Prussian War influenced Anglo-Italian horticulture; Wharton's parents also moved from Paris during the war, settling in Florence in a vast apartment overlooking the Arno.
[569] Though Wharton described the garden as 'homely' and 'box-scented', the grounds were large enough for Lee's father to hide in while avoiding his wife's social engagements; one bemused visitor recorded her surprise on learning that the man she'd encountered several times in the garden was, in fact, her host's husband.

at some point a gallery ran along the wall which linked the main house to the stable, creating a raised stage area. The only other distinguishing feature of the estate was a huge umbrella pine by the gate, which was lost in the severe storm of 1985.

Despite several detailed property maps drawn in Lee's own meticulous, masculine hand, the villa's archive has no garden plans; this, plus the many paths about the estate, suggest Lee's preference was for natural walks rather than formal gardens. As an epigraph to her chapter, 'Italian Gardens Old and Modern', Graham gives an un-sourced quote from Lee, stating: 'It is pleasant to have flowers growing in a garden. I make this remark because there have been many fine gardens without any flowers at all, in fact when the art of gardening reached its height it took to despising its original material.'[570] Certainly the preponderance of imported English bluebells, plus cosmos, nasturtiums, zinnias, marigolds and anemones now running wild, reveal Lee's own love of simple, cottage plants.

Within the timeless setting of her suburban villa Lee entertained friends and visiting luminaries, first as the spinster daughter of the house, then after her parents death, as the hostess in her own right. One Italian guest recorded summer evenings dining al fresco, beneath the vine pergola 'with the table lit by candles in glass globes and the fire flies dancing on the corn behind the little garden'.[571] Although the pergola has long gone, an ancient *fragola* grape by the stables recalls those enchanted evenings [44].

When her mother died in 1896, Lee's brother made a miraculous recovery and disappeared to America. The following year a furore ensued when Berenson accused Vernon Lee of plagiarism, suggesting that an article on aesthetics she had written with her companion, the artist Kit Anstruther-Thomson, was a distillation of 'numerous conversations I have been privileged to have with you at the Palmerino, and of even more numerous visits with Miss Anstruther-Thomas to the galleries'.[572] Berenson frequently accused old friends of plagiarism, and given Lee's exhaustive studies in the

[570] Ibid., p. 47.
[571] Gunn, p. 199.
[572] Gunn, p. 152, letter from BB dated 24 Aug, 1897, St Moritz.

subject the accusation seems unlikely, nonetheless the resulting rift split the Anglo-Florentine community for decades.[573]

In the early 1900s, after separating from Anstruther-Thomson, Lee rented the stable behind her villa to a widowed acquaintance, Irene Forbes-Mosse, immortalized as 'Ira' in Elizabeth von Arnim's 1889 *Elizabeth and Her German Garden.* When the estate came up for sale in 1906 Lee purchased it outright, raising funds by selling Forbes-Mosse a thirty-year lease to convert the stables into a *villino* or tiny villa for herself. Despite the modesty of her garden, whose simplicity might well have been determined by her frail stature and lack of wealth, Lee was widely hailed as an expert on Italian horticulture. Edith Wharton dedicated her seminal *Italian Villas and their Gardens* 'to Vernon Lee who, better than any one else, has understood and interpreted the garden-magic of Italy'. Indeed it seems unlikely that Wharton's book could have been written without Lee's aid; in *A Backward Glance* Wharton confesses: '[she] took me to nearly all the villas I wished to visit near Florence, and it was thanks to her recommendation that wherever I went, from the Lakes to the Roman Campagna, I found open doors and helpful hospitality'.[574] Wharton's travelling companion Percy Lubbock – who would later marry the prominent Anglo-Florentine Sybil Cutting - provides a vivid picture of the two women in garden-visiting mode:

> So there was Edith, bright and alert, brisk on her feet after a winged glance; and beside her Vernon Lee, tall and angular Vestal in her stiff collar and drab coat, fixed in rumination, absorbed and unheeding, her rugged face working in the toil and labour of her burrowing thought. She pondered, she reconnoitered as she talked, she wound her way through suggestions, sensation, speculation... While she talked on, with her pungent and guttural deliberation, a scene unrolled, brilliantly peopled and displayed – a drama was evolved out of all the admonitions, curious and lovely, grand and grotesque, of the genius of this place and this hour.[575]

Remarkably, despite her reputation as an expert, Lee published very little specifically on the subject of horticulture. Quest-Ritson is keen to acknowledge her, but appears unsure for what reason, describing her, rather vaguely, as 'an observant writer on Italian

---

[573] Mariano does not elaborate, saying, simply, 'there had been a cold war between her and the Berensons', suggesting that she too felt the accusation was unfair. *Forty Years With Berenson*, p. 102.
[574] Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, Constable, London, 1972, p. 135, 1st pub Scribner's New York, 1933.
[575] Gunn, p. 182.

gardens'.[576] Acton quotes her several times, drawing on her scholarship, but he too fails to describe her influence on the subject.[577] Ottewill acknowledges Lee's influence on Wharton, but again, resists explaining her role in the development of Anglo-Florentine horticulture.[578]

Because of the intangibility of her writing on the subject Lee has become a mere footnote in garden history. Nonetheless, her major contribution to horticulture is her rediscovery of the baroque at a time when the style was largely dismissed as vulgar and decadent. While conceding, in part, to the prejudices of her era, Lee perceived that baroque style was particularly appropriate to the garden. In an essay entitled 'In Praise of Old Italian Gardens', she celebrates baroque garden sculpture, noting its sympathy with antique, while pointing out that its sinewy exuberance appears to mimic nature, harmonizing the manmade with the natural:

> The antiques do well in their niches of box and laurel under their canopy of hanging ilex boughs; they are in their weather-stained mutilated condition, another sort of natural material fit for the artist's use; but the old sculpture being thus in a way assimilated through the operation of earth, wind and rain, into tree trunks and mossy boulders, a new sculpture arises undertaking to make of marble something which will continue the impression of trees and waters, wave its jagged outlines like the branches, twist its supple limbs like the fountains. [579]

While conceding that it might be 'mistaken as indoor decoration', she asserts 'this sculpture has, after all, given us the only works which are thoroughly right in the open air.'[580] Indeed, Lee argues for the baroque style in garden architecture:

> the rhythmic curves which may seem to weaken the structure of a massive building are singularly well-attuned to an undulating landscape, and decorations that appear to lack refinement within doors are none too bold in the open air. Colourful architectural effects seem only in keeping with the flowers.[581]

Though this essay appears to be the only place where Lee directly addresses the question of horticulture, her biographer records that in 1883, during her annual summer

---

[576] Quest-Ritson, p. 115.
[577] Acton, *Villas*, p. 226; 253; 260.
[578] Ottewill, p. 158.
[579] Nichols, p. 158.
[580] Ibid., p. 159.
[581] Ibid., p. 158.

visit to London to visit publishers, sell articles and maintain friendships, Lee attempted, unsuccessfully, to place a series of articles on the 'Outdoor Renaissance'.[582] Nonetheless references to Italian landscape and gardens permeate her essays.

Her first major essay was inspired by her discovery, at the age of fifteen, of Rome's *Bosco Parrasio*, which Masson describes as 'the final flourish of Baroque originality before [garden design] was engulfed by cold neo-classicism.'[583] Located on the Janiculum, the city's highest hill, the Bosco was created for the Arcadian Academy, a fashionable arts club whose members assumed shepherd's names, adopted the pan pipes as their emblem and promoted the pastoral form in drama, poetry and music. Banned, in 1699, from their quarters in the Orti Farnesiana, the Arcadians commissioned as their new meeting-place a sylvan amphitheatre surrounded by woodland embellished by fountains and statuary. An elegant casino provided shelter while an elaborate staircase descended to the ornate gates opening to the city.[584]

With its integration of baroque ornament and romantic setting this garden was crucial influence on the precocious teenager. Her essay on the Arcadians, published in 1878 in *Fraser's Magazine*, became the core of Lee's first book, *Studies Of the Eighteenth Century In Italy*.[585] In the introduction Lee describes the Bosco, stressing its picturesque decrepitude: 'muddy paths, dripping bushes, flower-beds filled with decaying ilex-leaves, lichen-covered benches, crumbling plaster and mouldering portraits – grim spectres looking down on the final ruin of Arcadia.' Delighted by hidden grottos and the morning glories smothering the amphitheatre, she is thrilled to discover the casino inhabited by market gardeners who hang their hats on the poets' busts and store their tools in the mouldering gaze of 'sad, haggard poetesses in sea green... draperies'.[586]

---

[582] Gunn, p. 89.
[583] Masson, p. 157.
[584] Masson assumes it was designed by Francesco di Sanctis, co-designer of the Spanish Steps.
[585] Lee, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century In Italy*, W Satchell, London, 1880.
[586] Ibid.,2nd ed, Unwin, London, 1907, p. 18.

In an essay written just before the First World War, Lee once again discovers an 'inexpressibly romantic' place, 'turreted and battlemented, with a vast jade-green fish-tank reflecting the frescoed hedges of cypress and the vases and strange inscriptions in its portico'.[587] Of the seventeenth-century judge who transformed his farmhouse into 'the delicate and scholarly place it still is', Lee observes: 'one got the idea of a self-respecting and scrupulous man of law, a fine scholar withal, living retired among friends, very modestly, but with a certain research and finish in all he did, visible...in the clipped hedges, the elaborate sundials, even in the scalloping of a mere corner of wall enclosing the garden.'[588] The Anglo-Florentine intelligentsia for whom Lee was writing would have seen echoes of the author in this laudatory description of a modest but diligent scholar who transforms a mundane farmhouse into an elegant baroque villa.

Lee's enchantment with the baroque was to shape her horticultural tastes, and through her, the tastes of the Anglo-Florentine community. Imitating the eighteenth-century Arcadians, who were copying the Renaissance gentlemen, copying the ancient Romans, following the Greek tradition, the Anglo-Florentines created elegant gardens as backgrounds to their intellectual lives. The fact that Lee's book went into a second printing attests to its widespread influence; indeed, Simon Calloway, in a study of twentieth-century baroque, declares her work 'a milestone' in the revaluation of 'the quirkier byways of seventeenth-and eighteenth-century art and life'.[589]

While Lee's taste for the baroque was taken up by the succeeding generation of Anglo-Florentines, most of these were arrogant, and fiercely competitive males who failed to acknowledge her influence. Though Berenson promoted early Renaissance artists, he developed his villa and garden in a distinctively baroque fashion; while Sitwell relished the romance of his twelfth-century castle, he created a baroque garden surround for the lower levels of the estate. Despite its medieval origins Arthur Acton chose to restore his villa to its baroque rather than any earlier incarnation. More importantly however, Lee's love of the baroque infused the young architect Geoffrey Scott whose seminal

---

[587] Lee, *The Golden Keys*, p. 23.
[588] Ibid., p. 24.
[589] Simon Calloway, *Baroque Baroque*, Phaidon, 1994, p. 37.

1914 *The Architecture of Humanism* inspired several generations before the modernists of the 1960s deemed it unfashionable. Again, though intangible, her influence is undeniable; Richard Dunn in an essay on Scott's book claims, vaguely, that what gave him the edge over his contemporaries was: 'his years in Italy, with Berenson and Vernon Lee'.[590]

In one of her final essays written during her retreat to England in 1917, Lee's 'In Time Of War' sounds the death knell for her favourite subject: 'among the many things, spiritual even more than material, which the war will have wrecked ... is the cult of the genius of places.'[591] After regretting the destruction of various French, Italian and, controversially, German towns, she laments even more the spiritual vandalising, 'that unconscious wrecking of our own soul's treasures', those places, still standing, which have been 'sacked, burnt, defiled ten thousand times over by millions of indignant wills and by imaginations thirsty for reprisals.' [592] Shocked at the animosity between Europe's greatest nations, appalled at the vengefulness directed towards the country of her birth, this genius of the genius loci had spent the war years in London, railing against the destruction of Germany. In 1920 she returned to Il Palmerino. Finding the villa too large, after a protracted legal battle she took over her tenant's *villino*, renting the main house to recompense Forbes-Mosses for her earlier expenses.[593]

In 1922, Mary Berenson brokered a rapprochement with Berenson, noting tersely in her diary: 'Miss Paget came to lunch and she and BB outdid themselves in glittering lies of a general nature.'[594] Both vulnerable, ageing foreigners in a diminishing expatriate community, Lee and BB rediscovered their common love of art.[595] Most poignantly

---

[590] Richard M. Dunn, Every Building Knows its Place; *Gli anglo-americani a Firenze*, ed. Marcello Fantoni, Bulsoni Editore, Rome, 2000, p. 119.
[591] Ibid., p. 241.
[592] Ibid., p. 241.
[593] Gunn, p. 210.
[594] Moorehead, p. 66.
[595] Mariano, describes how Lee, too deaf to hear Berenson's low, soft voice, carried a large ear horn, 'but had the curious habit of using it while she herself was talking and of dropping it the moment she was expected to listen.' Mariano, *Forty Years With Berenson*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1966, p. 102.

however, they were united in their abhorrence of the Fascists who were already gaining popularity.

In her little *villino*, with her newly purchased motor-car and a smattering of guests to amuse her, Lee lived out her days in the care of three ancient servants. Beevor, who visited as a child, claims that despite her cropped hair, stiff collars and men's clothes, Lee was 'particularly kind and gave me copies of all her books, and, more surprisingly, a loom, as if I were a character in one of her Tuscan fairytales.'[596] On her death Lee's ashes were deposited in the English Cemetery and her library was donated to the British Institute where visitors can still peruse the most fashionable books of the time with Lee's pithy comments jotted in the margins. Though she rarely wrote directly about gardens, Lee's rediscovery of the baroque, and her promoting of the style as particularly appropriate to the sphere of the garden, was a major influence on the development of Anglo-Florentine horticulture.

Il Palmerino was purchased in 1935 by an English-born painter, Lola Costa, and her Italian husband Federigo Angeli. Inspired, perhaps by her predecessor's English origins, Costa worked to preserve Lee's memory. During her first her year at the villa Costa painted an image of the *villino* showing a gravel terrace along the front entrance, four box parterres surrounding two central lilac trees beyond, and the august pine off to the side. An avenue bisecting the parterres is planted with potted lemons, and through a double iron arch at the end, the garden gives over to a rural landscape punctuated with cypresses and pines. It is unclear whether this was designed by Forbes Mosse or by Lee herself when she took over the *villino*, nonetheless this is the garden in which Vernon Lee spent the final decades of her life. Despite its simplicity and modesty, lacking both statuary and water, the design suggests the harmonious blend of Italian formality and English embellishment which characterizes the best Anglo-Florentine gardens.

[596] Beevor, p. 105

XVII. A Pagan Citadel: Sir George Sitwell's Montegufoni

Among the Anglo-Florentines there was a distinct strain of foetid romanticism, epitomised by the lugubrious Sir George Sitwell (1860-1943) whose dramatic twelfth-century fortress, Montegufoni, juts over the Via Volterrana twenty kilometres south of Florence [5]. Around this, Sitwell created a series of simple but elegant gardens, imbuing his Gothic tower with what Acton described as 'a poetical atmosphere entirely *sui generis*.'[597]

Though his *On The Making of Gardens* was published in 1909 and his Tuscan garden was created between the two world wars, Sitwell really belongs to the late-nineteenth-century with Ross seeking Virgilian precedents for her rural life, Lee exploring baroque gallants, Lady Paget cultivating her romantic moonlit meadows and Temple Leader with his medieval fantasies. Such *fin de siècle* escapism took a vaguely morbid turn with the dolorous aristocrat who sought out Italy's old gardens, 'with their air of neglect, desolation and solitude' and divined therein a world of 'fluteless Pans, headless nymphs and armless Apollos'.[598] Of the Villa d'Este Sitwell enthused: 'from the sombre alley and moss-grown stair there rises a faint sweet fragrance of decay,' and in the Giusti gardens he found 'a wild riot of jagged cypresses as might serve for a painted scene of a witches' sabbath'.[599]

Perversely, though he created a formal Italianate garden for his Gothic family seat in Derbyshire, Sitwell created a Gothic style garden for his Italian villa.[600] Having spent several decades exploring the Italian peninsula as he researched his book on Italian gardens, Sitwell purchased the Castello di Montegufoni in 1910 [31]. Though it has been described, intriguingly, as 'one of the last citadels of the aesthetic movement in Tuscany', Montegufoni has none of the refined dandyism of the movement, being

---

[597] Acton, *Villas*, p. 135.
[598] Sitwell, p. 8.
[599] Sitwell, p. 8; p. 11.
[600] For a description, see An Infinity of Graces: Sir George Sitwell's Renishaw, Katie Campbell, Hortus, No 66, Summer, 2003, p. 59.

neither particularly subtle nor sensuous nor, indeed symbolic.[601] What it is, however, is a brilliant combination of medieval and baroque styles. Originally a settlement rather than single architectural unit, the castle began as four houses within a fortified wall. Constructed around a thousand years ago, the first official records of the estate date from 1135, and it is thought that the title Lord of Montegufoni was created by the Margrave Matilda in her bid to retain the region's loyalty in the eleventh-century disputes between pope and emperor.[602]

By the thirteenth century the castle belonged to the Acciaiuoli family, who, like the Medici and Pitti, were prominent Florentine bankers. In 1386 the central tower was constructed, reminiscent of that of the Palazzo Vecchio with its assertion of both grace and power. It was not until the sixteenth century, however, that the original houses, now seven in number, were joined into a single unit. In the seventeenth century the chapel was built and the eastern and northern façades were added, contributing a layer of baroque elegance to the medieval fortress [77]. At this time the formal gardens were also laid out; the steep drop was transformed into a balustraded forecourt with two grass terraces below, accessed by double ramp enclosing a grotto. Happily, despite his professed aversion to images of Time in a garden, 'the spoiler of roses who lays his hateful scythe to the roots of the fairest flowers', Sitwell left the sundial suspended from the castle's north-eastern wall, inscribed with the year of the villa's zenith, 1699.[603]

From this point Montegufoni appears to have slowly sunk into decrepitude until it was purchased by Sitwell, on the anticipated proceeds from his recently published magnum opus. The castle, chapel, some surrounding farmhouses and nine hectares cost 120,000 lire.[604] Sitwell justified the purchase to his son Osbert, claiming: 'apart from the romantic interest, [it] is a good one as it returns five per cent. The roof is in splendid

---

[601] Philippe Jullian, *Violet Trefusis Life and Letters*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1976 p. 124.
[602] Pestelli, p. 12.
[603] Sitwell, p. 54.
[604] Pestelli, p. 147.

order, and the drains can't be wrong, as there aren't any.'[605] The letter also mentions the remains of a terraced garden, grotto and statues, the latter feature Sitwell felt essential in a garden, 'to satisfy the human urge to find a creature like itself...to give a personal interpretation to the forces of Nature'.[606] One of Sitwell's earliest acts as the new lord of Montegufoni was to purchase musical instruments for the local villagers. Forming a band, known affectionately as the 'Philharmonic Society of Montegufoni', they would gather at the castle to serenade its guests on summer evenings and provide dance music for their grand balls. Indeed the locals provided much amusement; one September Osbert loftily observed: 'Every evening before the angelus, with a low and syncopated sound you can see the peasants bringing home the harvest with their white oxen.'[607]

In 1925, when he moved permanently to Italy to avoid England's punitive post-war taxes, Sitwell turned his attentions to the grounds, having spent the intervening years re-housing the 300 peasants who inhabited the castle and removing the worst of the architectural accretions [12]. In keeping with Italian horticultural tradition, he relied on architecture rather than plants for his effects. Removing the various grain and vegetable plots which had accumulated over the years, he filled the surrounding slopes with Tuscan roses which conformed to the requirement, wryly described by his son Osbert, that any blossoms 'had, like all else in good taste, to be unobtrusive, not to call attention to themselves by hue or scent, but to form vague pointillist masses of colour that could never detract from the view, and to infuse the air with a sweetness never to be identified.'[608] Osbert himself was not immune to flowers; extolling the villa in early May 'when the wisteria is in full flower...and distils its perfume far and wide, when the banksias roses cascade over the high walls of the terraces...'[609]

---

[605] Acton, p. 134.
[606] Sitwell, p. 54. Though his English estate, Renishaw, contains all manner of giants, Amazons, warriors and mythical creatures, Sitwell was rather more restrained at Montegufoni, where several stone lions, some cannon balls and terra cotta urns form the bulk of the statuary.
[607] Pestelli, p. 158.
[608] Sitwell p. xv.
[609] Sitwell, Osbert, *Tales My Father Told Me*, p. 11

Restoring the central courtyard to its medieval austerity Sitwell removed a large oleander bush which he replanted as the focal point of the Cardinal's Garden to the west.[610] To emphasise the medieval mood of the courtyard, Sitwell installed clumps of stone cannon-balls which provided the only ornamentation besides an ancient wellhead and a few potted plants.[611] He then set about restoring the western terrace. Guarded by a pair of worn stone lions, protected from the precipice by a line of cypresses on one side and a wisteria-covered pergola on the other, this small formal space is bisected by gravel paths, with scrolling boxwood parterres surrounding the replanted oleander. Though today the parterres are adorned with colourful geraniums, Sitwell planted them with more sober stocks and plumbago, a concession to his wife's pleas for colour and scent. Now known as 'The English Garden' after its creator, Sitwell called this area 'The Cardinal's Garden' after Nicola Acciaioli, created cardinal in 1669 by Pope Clemente IX, whose apartments once fronted the terrace. Osbert described the commanding view from this terrace where his father would hold court in an uncomfortable wicker deck chair: 'the valley of vines, and nearer, climbing the Castle Hill in steep terraces, the long tank-like stone beds full of blue plumbago, leading up in turn to the surrounding box parterre in which were growing the flowers he had chosen for it in pale pastel colours.'[612]

In the early 1920s, while Sitwell was preoccupied with the gardens, his sons Osbert and Sacheverell commissioned a friend, the Italian Futurist artist Gino Severini, to fresco one of the grand halls within. Drawing the surrounding countryside right into the castle's dark interior, Severini created a delightful scene where melancholy musicians, inspired perhaps by the Montegufoni Philharmonic Orchestra, drink, dance, muse and cavort against a background of rolling hills, stately cypresses, spreading olives and dusty aloes [78].[613] Brilliantly interpreting his commission Severini combined cubist forms, surrealist juxtapositions and traditional *commedia del arte* subjects with the

---

[610] Sitwell was an expert in the moving of trees; Osbert recounts how his father's mood could be gauged by level of a pair of ancient yews which he raised or lowered at whim in Renishaw; Sitwell, p. xviii
[611] Osbert Sitwell, *Left Hand, Right Hand*, Macmillan, London, 1957, p. 190.
[612] Ibid., p. 183.
[613] Andrea Pestelli, who lived in the villa as the offspring of the guardian, notes Osbert claimed the three masked figures represented himself, his brother and Severini. Pestelli, *The Castle of Montegufoni*, p. 154.

languid harlequins offering a charming, if slightly camp, evocation of the *otium* enjoyed at the castle. Acton later suggested that the 'fretful violence' of the Futurists seemed to prophesy the First World War, as Surrealism did the Second; he also suggests that the Futurists' shocking style - its brilliant colours, gay whirligigs and geometric forms - was soon 'neutralized by Fascism'.[614] Certainly Severini's frescoes at Montegufoni seem more nostalgic than iconoclastic, their simple forms and pastel colours recalling the naivety of Giotto rather than any Modernist rebellion.

Though initially sceptical of the project, Sitwell was delighted with the result, and immediately commandeered the frescoed hall, known as the Hall of the Masks, as his own private salon.

In 1931 Sitwell extended the formal grounds, re-creating the terraces below the castle ramparts. Cloaking the bastion walls in roses, he laid out the upper terrace as a lemon garden, its long grass avenue lined with citrus trees, many in their original seventeenth-century pots. The lower terrace was left to wild-flowers and fruit trees with an iris walk along its outer edge creating an informal link between the classical gardens above and the daisy-filled meadow below.

The gardens were finally completed in 1939, on the eve of the Second World War, when Sitwell restored the Grotto. Earlier, Acton had noted: 'A great stone stair-case let to a shell grotto, but the place had long been occupied by families of indifferent peasants.'[615] Under Sir George's restorations, a loosely-clad woman flanked by clamouring babies and bewildered frogs evoked the tale of Latona [79]. Mocked by peasants while fetching water for her offspring, Apollo and Diana, Latona appealed to her lover Jupiter, who avenged her by turning her persecutors into frogs. Four side niches contain angry peasants; one, an etiolated youth casting stones, looks remarkably like the young Sacheverell. A painted ceiling depicts Jupiter in god-like majesty while a glittering mosaic floor, and mirrors embedded in the walls multiply the shimmering

[614] Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 38.
[615] Ibid., p. 107.

effect. Today the Grotto is dusty and dry, but it must have been magnificent with the water glimmering round its cavernous interior. While Louis XIV's central Latona fountain at Versailles warned courtiers of the perils of gossip, Sitwell, whose precocious offspring were notorious publicity-seekers, probably appreciated the plastic potential of the scene rather than its allegorical significance. Indeed Sitwell's book reveals a typical Anglo-Florentine indifference to iconography, totally ignoring the symbolic content of the gardens it explores.

During the war Sitwell retreated to neutral Switzerland and died soon after, leaving the castle to his son Osbert. In 1942 when Florence was threatened with bombardment, the city's finest artworks were moved from the churches and art galleries, and stored for safety in surrounding villas. Despite being owned by 'the enemy', Montegufoni seemed an ideal cache with its large halls and discrete position. One of the grand halls was re-named the 'Office of Monuments and Fine Arts' and used to house 261 works by such artists as Botticelli, Uccello, Cimabue, Giotto and Raphael. Though the castle was commandeered first by the German SS as a residence, then by the Allies as a look-out tower, the only damage to the artworks was a knife-wound to a Ghirlandaio tondo which had been used by the German officers as a dining table.[616]

Similarly, while fighting reached the fields around the estate, the castle itself was largely unscathed. During the war years when the castle harboured 600 refugees from surrounding villages, the gardens probably reverted to their medieval squalor. As Lee once noted, the medieval castle garden had never been filled with 'her ladyship's lilies and gillyflowers; salads and roots must grow there, and onions and leeks, for it is not always convenient to get vegetables from the villages below, particularly when there are enemies or disbanded pillaging mercenaries about; hence, also, there will be fewer roses than vines, pears or apples, spaliered against the castle wall.' [617]

---

[616] Pistelli, p. 166.
[617] Acton, p. 253.

After the war Osbert used Montegufoni as a second home, while retaining Renishaw, in England, as his primary residence. Though lack of money and lack of interest, he left the place virtually unchanged. As in the pre-war days he and his sister, the alarming poet Edith Sitwell, filled the castle with illustrious guests such as the writer Constant Lambert, the composer Sir William Walton and artist John Piper. In 1965 Osbert settled permanently in Montegufoni, partly, as his father had done half a century before, to avoid British taxes, and partly because he preferred the climate. Osbert died in 1969 and was buried at the cemetery of the Allori at Galluzzo nearby. Three years later his heir and nephew, Sir Reresby Sitwell, sold the castle to a local family, the Posarellis. Unable to maintain the vast grounds on the proceeds of farming they turned the estate over to holiday accommodation. A swimming pool was discretely inserted into the lower terrace, the original ten apartments were multiplied to create forty, and the castle continues to thrive on Tuscany's buoyant tourist trade.

Despite sharing in its passion for gardens, Sir George Sitwell is curiously absent from the archives and memoirs of the Anglo-Florentine community. Though Acton devotes several pages to Montegufoni, Nichols makes no reference to it in her 1929 *Italian Pleasure Gardens*. Though Moorhead reports that Harold Nicholson and Vita Sackville West, while visiting Sybil Cutting in 1923, took an expedition to see Sitwell, Origo herself makes no reference to him in her 1970 autobiography.[618] Already old, curmudgeonly and reclusive when he settled in Italy, Sitwell had little time for the hyper-intellectual, hyper-academic community. Nonetheless his threnody to Italy's classical gardens captured the late-nineteenth century Anglo-Florentine approach, while his careful restoration of a medieval relic reflected their romantic respect for the country's distant past. As Acton recalled: 'even after thirty years or more of cautious restoration, the castle still had 'an air of forlorn grandeur', clearly its main attraction for Sir George.[619]

[618] Moorehead, p. 70.
[619] Acton, *Villas*, p. 134.

Sitwell began writing *On the Making of Gardens* after he suffered a nervous breakdown, which he delicately described as, 'a period of broken health, when slowly recovering from the effects of over-work'.[620] While his essay attests to the beneficial effects of garden-visiting, it remains more a therapeutic exercise than a practical horticultural text. In its own time the book was virtually ignored. Le Blond notes Sitwell in her bibliography but makes no reference to him in her text, while neither Eberlein nor Bolton mention him at all.[621] Today no right-thinking garden historian would be without it, Hobhouse describes it as 'necessary reading for any garden designer, while Jane Brown maintains 'no self-respecting gardener would be without it'.[622] Its real appeal however is Sitwell's enchanting prose, loquacious style, and passion for his subject. He encapsulates the particular attitude of a small and rather recherché community at unique moment in history.

[620] Sir George Sitwell, p xix.
[621] Le Blond, p. 170.
[622] Quoted in *The Garden at Renishaw Hall*, by Reresby Sitwell, p, 1; pamphlet produced by and sold at Renishaw.

XVIII. The Last Refuge of the Aesthete: The Acton's La Pietra

Rising regally from the surrounding agricultural olive terraces, enclosed by extensive architectural gardens, the baroque villa of La Pietra is the most grand of the Anglo-Florentine estates. Quest-Ritson describes it as a homage to the Italian Renaissance, 'by the one family whose house, garden and very personality have come to represent to Englishmen and Italians alike all that is best in the Anglo-Florentine connection.'[623] For two generations the Actons presided over Anglo-Florentine society, amassing an enviable art collection, researching Italian history, restoring their magnificent villa and hosting the community's most illustrious guests. Though La Pietra has long been associated with the aesthete and scholar, Harold Acton, it was, in fact, the creation of his father, Arthur Acton (1873-1953).

Having studied at the Beaux Arts School in Paris, Arthur Acton arrived in Florence in the 1890s to work as an artist. Though his son avers that Acton 'painted intermittently', he soon evolved a lucrative sideline as agent to the American architect Stamford White, to whom he supplied Renaissance antiques with scant regard for their authenticity. In 1903 Acton married a rich American, Hortense Mitchell, whose brother Guy, owned a villa, Il Guillarino, next to Villa Capponi.[624] The couple settled in Florence renting La Pietra, a magnificent fifteenth-century villa one mile north of the San Gallo gate on the old Bologna road **[20, 35]**.

Named for the milestone at its gate, La Pietra had a long and illustrious history. Most chronologies of the estate begin with the fifteenth-century villa built for Francesco Sassetti a prominent Florentine banker who served both Cosimo de Medici and his grandson Lorenzo. Acton however, traces the villa's story back to the Middle Ages when the estate belonged to the Macinghi family, eight of whom, he proudly recounts, served as priors of the Republic. In 1460 the villa, adjacent buildings and farm were sold to the Sassettis, who, 'according to an ancient chronicle', descended from early

[623] Quest-Ritson, p. 124.
[624] Now known as the Spellman Villa, it is currently owned by John's Hopkins University.

Saxon kings.[625] Encompassing both the fledgling republicanism of the priors and the royalty of the Saxons, the Middle Ages as well as the Renaissance, La Pietra's pedigree was unrivalled within the English community.

Under the Sassettis the estate evolved from *villa rustica* - a rural estate supplying produce for the family's urban needs, to *villa urbana* - an elegant country dwelling for leisure and study. Eberlein notes that in the sixteenth century the firm rule of Duke Cosimo de Medici diminished the need for defensive architecture, while the rise of an affluent merchant class led to more ostentatious buildings as the country villa evolved from working farm to favoured place of entertainment.[626]

Reflecting the peace and prosperity of the times the Sassettis' castellated farm-house was expanded around a central courtyard to create a Renaissance palace. Acton suggests that at this time the lemon house was added to the far end of the walled *pomario* or orchard which abuts the villa's north side. It was probably also at this time that the grill-work was added to the windows of the villa's rusticated ground floor, evoking the heavily defended palaces of medieval Florentine nobles.[627] Acton notes that a fifteenth-century plan of the villa depicts a '*giardino grande*' at the back with a *giardino segreto* to the south, balancing the *pomario* to the north.[628] It also depicts a central courtyard with a well.

In 1546 the Sassettis sold the property to another prominent banking family, the Capponis. They inhabited it over the next three centuries, embellishing the rear façade with their coat of arms surmounted by a cardinal's hat in honour of Luigi Capponi who attained that office in 1608. Acton, rather fancifully, attributes the renovations to Carlo

---

[625] Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 3.
[626] Eberlein, p. 30.
[627] Serving first under Cosimo and later under his grandson Lorenzo, Sassetti gained in power and prestige. In 1481 he hired Ghirlandaio to paint the frescoes in the Sassetti Chapel in Santa Trinita, depicting himself and his wife kneeling on either side of the altar, with his son, Teodoro as a cherub in profile on the upper right, frolicking amid scenes from the life of St Francis which include portraits of Lorenzo and other notables of the day
[628] Acton notes the plan is in the Uffizi Gallery's department of drawings; it was reproduced in Georgio Vasari Junior's *Plans for the Churches and Palaces of Tuscany* (1598), republished, Officina Edizioni, Rome 1970.

Fontana (1634-1714) who had trained under Bernini.[629] The Cardinal would probably have begun the remodelling soon after attaining office and Fontana was not even born until nearly two decades later. Like his compatriots however, Acton was keen to link his villa with illustrious figures and was unlikely to enquire too deeply into the myths surrounding its past.

Whoever oversaw the villa's remodelling, the Cardinal demanded that the central portion of the house be raised to accommodate a ballroom appropriate to his new status. He also transformed the exterior, covering the walls with golden stucco, adding elegant pediments and framing the massive windows in the local grey *pietra serena.* Capponi also added the two handsome lodges at the outer gate and decorated the orchard walls with typical seventeenth century *rocaille,* using shells, pebbles and rocks to create scrolls and festoons while topping the wall with alternating urns and busts. Acton suggests that it was also at this time that the central courtyard was covered over and the elliptical staircase was introduced, adding that when his father restored the villa in the early twentieth century he placed a marble fountain – 'attributed to Benedetto da Maiano' - on the space where the well would have been.[630] Though attributing this particular feature to the Cardinal gives it greater romance, the roofing of the courtyard is more likely to have happened in the nineteenth century when many other Florentine villas, such as Villa Capponi, Il Palmieri, and Torre Bellosguardo, had their loggias glassed in and their internal courtyards covered.

Though little is known of its eighteenth-century incarnation, a contemporary painting depicts the estate with two walled gardens flanking the main house, and a causeway linking it, across the valley, to the Bologna road [**36**]. In the nineteenth century the Capponi family sold the villa and whatever gardens existed at back of the house were swept away in the vogue for *giardino inglese.* This might well also be when the southern walled garden was removed, since a contemporary photograph shows trees and

[629] Acton, *Villas,* p. 140
[630] Ibid., p. 142.

shrubs dotting a lawn that sweeps right up to the villa, which itself is smothered in greenery, in the English fashion [24].[631]

In 1907, having rented La Pietra for several years, the Actons purchased the fifty-seven acre estate including the villa and four other dwellings. Arthur Acton immediately began what his son later dubbed 'the process of tuscanisation'. Removing the nineteenth-century parkland, he replaced it with formal gardens appropriate the villa's baroque façade. Ultimately eight and a half acres would be devoted to gardens with much of the rest of the land given over to olives as it had been in the past. Though they had little to do with the farming of the land, Acton described the groves in quasi-religious terms: 'the olives, pruned like chalices, were centuries old, increasing in fertility with age, and they filled the valley with a silvery smoke.'[632]

Though Arthur Acton is generally credited with the garden's design, various professionals have been associated with the project. In the 1960s Masson duly proclaimed: 'the layout was by the late Arthur Acton and his Polish gardener'.[633] More recent scholarship, however, has questioned Acton's role. Hobhouse, a personal friend of Harold Acton, asserts: 'The present grounds were laid out around 1908 for Arthur Acton by the French garden designer Henri Duchene...'[634] Harold Acton makes no reference to any designer, neither in his memoirs nor in *Tuscan Villas*, claiming only that his father 'restored and reconstructed it on pure Tuscan lines,' and that he 'refined upon the traces of the former garden and its retaining walls, with all the creative ingenuity of a cinquecento architect'.[635]

The suggestion that Arthur Acton alone devised the whole project suggests the phenomenon, lamented by today's designers, of owners claiming credit for the work of hired professionals. It is unlikely that such a grand enterprise could have been undertaken by an amateur, even a trained artist. Indeed a stone inscription in an

[631] Richard Turner, *La Pietra*, Edizioni Olivares, Florence, 2002, p. 49.
[632] Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 12.
[633] Masson, p. 84.
[634] Hobhouse, *Gardens of Italy*, Mitchell Beazley, London 1998, p. 77.
[635] Acton, *Memoirs*, p .6.

isolated corner of the garden records the leading figures behind the restoration, naming the garden designers Mariano Ambroziewicz, Pasquale Bonaiuti, Guiseppe Castellucci, H.O. Watson and Edwin Dodge, one-time husband of Luhan who provides such insights into Acton's character.[636] The Trust which currently owns the estate is rather defensive about the issue, noting that Acton made initial drawings and plaster topographical models: 'Some have argued that others are responsible for the design of the gardens at La Pietra, but it is hard to imagine that Acton would have relinquished oversight of the project'.[637] While the final authorship may never be determined, clearly Arthur Acton was the guiding spirit behind the design.

It is interesting that the commemorative plaque and Harold Acton's memoirs both refer to the project as a 'restoration'. Given that there was little, if any, left to restore, the work would more accurately be described as recreation, revival, homage or pastiche. This misleading claim of authenticity by Actons *père* and *fils* once again demonstrates the Anglo-Florentine obsession with linking themselves to the past.

Arthur Acton's first horticultural act at La Pietra was to remove the existing false acacia trees and line the eight-hundred-metre causeway with the cypresses so beloved of the Anglo-Florentines.[638] The severity of this dark green tunnel was later relieved with an inner row of *Rosa chinensis*, locally known as May roses or *la rosa d'ogni mese*, 'the every-month rose', as they flower from March to November.[639]

As the *pomario* was the only remnant of the earlier baroque garden, it was one of the first areas to be restored; the *rocaille* work was repaired, the space was divided into eight box-edged beds for vegetables and the enclosing walls were planted with espaliered fruit trees. Acton also embellished the utilitarian space planting *Banksia* roses to cover the walls, growing flowers in the vegetable beds, planting iris and violas

[636] Pozzana, p. 62.
[637] Turner, p. 58.
[638] *La Pietra*, p. 58.
[639] This dutiful rose was much prized by the community; decades earlier Ross had lined her sinuous driveway at Poggio Gherardo with *Rosa chinensis*, and later Luhan, copied the cypress/rose combination for the steep drive at her own Villa Curonia, though she further embellished it with a band of iris to create 'a firm line of pink and lavender all along the base of the warm, dark cypress green.' Luhan, p. 138.

along the walls and flanking the gravel paths with potted citrus trees [80], over a hundred of which were housed in the *stanzone* at one end [43]. His son, Harold, describes the narcotic potency of the enclosed garden:

> the juiciest peaches clustered by the *rocaille* walls, haunted by emerald lizards, and the Californian tomatoes hung heavily, softening and reddening in the sun... In the warm water of the central fountain frogs forgot to leap into hiding under the flat lily leaves and stared upwards as if hypnotized while thirsty dragonflies flashed past for a quick sip and bloated goldfish mouthed at insects drunk with honeysuckle.[640]

In the traditional manner, the grounds at La Pietra were conceived as a series of outdoor rooms, linking the villa to the surrounding countryside through terraces, parterres, hedged walks and dramatic framed vistas. Florence is visible, obliquely in the valley ahead and Fiesole, equally obliquely, on the hilltop behind. Throughout the gardens, verticality is provided by tall, enclosing hedges and clipped topiary while the occasional whimsical peacock reveals an Edwardian exuberance which the recent restorations have preserved.

The main gardens, created from the steep slope at the back of the villa, were laid out in a series of broad terraces. The top terrace abutting the villa is a long gravel platform, enclosed by a stone balustrade, adorned with statues. To emphasize the central axis and avoid impeding the view, the balustrade is lowered in front of the central entrance. Flanking staircases lead to the main terrace below, known as the *prima vasca* because of the oval basin at its heart. This, and the *seconda vasca* below it, are both enclosed by low walls and clipped hedges containing niches for further statuary [81]. Both feature a fountain dripping into a fish-filled basin, and both are interlaced with gravel paths, grass lawns and box-lined parterres. The lowest terrace is bounded by a Greek *peristyle*, separating the formal garden from vineyards beyond. At the centre of this, dramatically sited against a background of cypresses, stands a statue of Hercules, shaded by wisteria dripping from the surrounding colonnade.

---

[640] Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 11.

Paths from the central terraces lead to hedge-enclosed rooms containing exedras, portals, pergolas, balustrades, vases and other forms of statuary. Indeed statuary is a major feature of La Pietra, with over a hundred pieces, not including busts [82]. One axis leads to a *tempietto* or temple in an open lawn, against a background of green trees. Another ends in a heavy Colossus by Orazio Marinali who is known to have provided statues for Andrea Palladio's seventeenth-century Veneto villas.

In a totally different mood, the green *teatrino* at the end of another axis has boxwood footlights and 'wings' peopled by Francesco Bonazza's graceful, eighteenth-century Venetian genre figures. Eberlein's plan shows that by 1922 the theatre was not yet constructed though, as he makes clear, the theatre at Villa Garzoni near Lucca survived the First World War unscathed, so it may well have provided the inspiration for Acton.[641] The archives at La Pietra contain many photos of costumed figures cavorting in this area, suggesting that through the 1930s the theatre was the focus of outdoor entertainments [83].

In the Italian style, La Pietra is essentially a green garden; colour is incidental, but variety is provided by the various shades of cypress, boxwood, laurel, holm-oak, umbrella pine, grass and lavender. Sunlight and shadow are as important as plants and statuary, though the water effects are modest, as was traditional in the region. To the Anglo-Florentine community, the garden appeared as authentic as the villa it surrounded; indeed Acton boasted that most visitors are unaware that the garden was 'a product of the twentieth rather than the sixteenth century'.[642]

History, however, has challenged this view. Masson describes La Pietra as 'the foreigner's conception of the ideal Italian garden' though she fails to explain how it falls short of authenticity.[643] Similarly Quest-Ritson calls it 'an English Edwardian interpretation of a Florentine garden', though again he does not justify his remark beyond objecting to the Irish yews whose golden colour jars 'among the greens of a

[641] Eberlein, p. 388.
[642] Harold Acton, *Villas*, p. 143.
[643] Masson, p. 118.

Tuscan garden'.[644] Atlee calls it 'a triumphant synthesis', with the traditional structured, green Tuscan garden clothed in an English overlay of flowering climbers – the Dorothy Perkins rose on the staircases, the *Rosa Banksia* on the pergola and the dripping wisteria on the colonnade.[645] Hobhouse describes it as 'a poetic essay in the manipulation of space and architectural symmetry'.[646]

As this is the first Anglo-Florentine garden consciously created in the classical style, it is worth exploring why history has denied it that label. Since Cosimo de Medici's mid-sixteenth-century Villa Castello is widely held to be the first Renaissance garden, with Villa d'Este and Villa Lante compete as the classic Renaissance gardens, these three seem appropriate standards against which to compare La Pietra. Acton's garden fulfils Alberti's criteria regarding site; situated at the top of a steep hill the surrounding vegetation has been carefully contrived to ensure the villa encompasses views of formal gardens, farmland and countryside with a distant view of the city. As at Villa d'Este the slope has been terraced with elaborate earthworks, buttressing walls and elegant stairways. The garden extends from the villa in a series of self-contained 'rooms'; geometric topiary and ancient statuary are the major elements with floral embellishment a secondary consideration. Though its two fountains offer less elaborate water effects than those of Villa d'Este or Villa Lante, Tuscan gardens traditionally made little use of water. Though allegory is conspicuously lacking, there is an appreciation of symbolism, as, for example, where images of Psyche and Cupid reside in a temple of love.

One significant element to the understanding of La Pietra – a fact ignored by both Harold Acton and the Trust which now own the estate – is that Acton must have designed the garden, at least in part, to display his collection of statuary to potential purchasers. Though his propitious marriage allowed him to eschew the vulgar role of common dealer, it appears that everything in La Pietra was negotiable. Indeed Luhan, who was introduced to the Actons by her bank manager, suggests that La Pietra was

---

[644] Quest-Ritson, p. 124.
[645] Attlee, p. 225.
[646] Hortus, No. 3, Autumn 1987, 'The Gardens of the Villa La Foce', Penelope Hobhouse, p. 73.

essentially a show room; she recounts the local gossip that Arthur was 'a kind of dealer, has a shop somewhere, but his wife makes him hide it. He's supposed just to sell things to other American dealers that come, but they say, my dear, you can buy anything in his villa if you want it.'[647]

Like his neighbour Stibbert, Arthur Acton was a magpie collector. While concentrating on the Renaissance art which was popular at the time, he accumulated all manner of objects from paintings and sculpture through textiles and furniture. Rather than placing these works in historically accurate groupings he displayed them in domestic settings which showed each piece to advantage. While this allowed him to integrate his collection into his home and garden, there was probably also a commercial motive behind his approach.[648] Harold Acton noted: 'My parents welcomed half Florence to the villa, as well as itinerant museum directors and art critics who came to view the collection'; it is not unreasonable to suppose that at least some of these visitors were viewing the collection with a view to acquisition.[649]

Despite the discretion with which the Anglo-Florentines carried out their commerce, art dealing was common within the community. In her 1878 roman a clef, *Friendship*, Ouida's protagonist, a clever but unscrupulous woman, subtly purveys newly-minted art and antiquities to rich but naive visitors. Adorning her villa with the wares she wishes to sell them, the hero exploits her social prominence, entertaining her victims with the collusion of her accommodating spouse. Though this was, reputedly, a portrait of Janet Ross, it could equally describe Arthur Acton. Two generations later, in his 1925 roman a clef, *Those Barren Leaves*, Huxley's lugubrious Mr. Cardon expatiates on the Anglo-Florentine penchant for dealing:

> It has the charm of being more dishonest than almost any other form of licensed brigandage ... You take advantage of the ignorance or urgent poverty of the vendor to get the work for nothing. You then exploit the snobbery and the almost equally profound ignorance of the rich buyer to

[647] Luhan, p. 104.
[648] The villa interior reveals an unanticipated sense of humour. From an oculus in the entrance hall a sculpture of a Moorish servant protrudes, holding a real lantern; a Last Supper reigns over the dining room and a real birdcage is housed against a wall frescoed with birds.
[649] Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 40.

> make him take the stuff off your hands at some fantastic price. What huge elation one must feel when one has succeeded in bringing off some splendid coup! Bought a blackened panel from some decayed gentleman in need of a new suit, cleaned it up and sold it again to a rich snob who thinks that a collection and the reputation of being a patron of the ancient arts will give him a leg up in society...'[650]

Luhan said of Acton, 'He looked as though he were made of wax, and the faint, pretty smile on his small kind mouth seemed to proclaim him as utterly harmless; but later, when I knew him better, he revealed an interesting, hard, and quite impervious nature.'[651] Indeed, it comes as a surprise to many to discover that Arthur Acton, a pillar, if not a foundation stone of the community, was known in his own time as a scoundrel. Berenson, in private correspondence, described him as 'a bounder' adding, 'but he has a flair for good things'.[652] In 1874 Charles Grenville described the expatriate community of Florence as 'the refuse of Europe, people who come here from want of money or want of character.'[653] Acton appears to have wanted both. While Leavitt suggests he had clashed with the British police for photographing under-aged girls, others believe it was the Italian police with whom he had clashed.[654] In any case such vices were not uncommon; Beevor recalls that Colonel George Keppel kept a studio for 'artistic poses', luring girls with his red Lancia sports car to photograph them swimming in his pool at l'Ombrellina; she adds, compassionately: 'Everybody adored his wife, Alice Keppel, King Edward VII's favourite, and he must have felt left out.'[655]

At that time, the era of Charles Dodgson and Julia Cameron, when photographs of naked children freely passed as art, Berenson's assessment of Acton might stem, instead, from his putative relationship with young Italian aristocrat, Ersilia Beacci, by whom he is said to have sired a daughter. Indeed, Harold Acton avers that 'nearly all the old Florentine families had Anglo Saxon ramifications' though he refused to acknowledge any Italian ramification in his own family.[656]

---

[650] Huxley, p. 203-4.
[651] Luhan, p. 104.
[652] Turner, p. 76.
[653] Treves, p. 16.
[654] Leavitt, p. 86.
[655] Beevor, p. 148.
[656] Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 9.

Through the 1930s, the Actons, like many Anglo-Florentines, ignored the rising Fascism and quietly cultivated their garden; even the worldly Harold reported of Mussolini's supporters: 'the prime attraction was the uniform, the right to cut a dashing figure without entailing risks.'[657] But the Second World War decisively destroyed the Actons's idyll. Hortense, whose American citizenship made her an enemy alien, retreated to Switzerland, while Arthur waited too long and had to bribe his way out of the country to follow her. The Fascists then confiscated Acton's art collection, and though it was later returned, he never recovered his faith in the country. When his younger son died during the war, Arthur turned the estate over to Harold to run. After his father's death in 1953 Harold shared La Pietra with his mother until her death in 1962.

A celebrated poet during his youth in Oxford, Harold Acton is reputed to be the inspiration behind the decadent, aesthetic Anthony Blanche in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, not least because, like Blanche, he famously recited T.S Eliot's *The Waste Land* from a megaphone at a garden party in Worcester College.

Though probably remembered more for his conversation than his books, Acton followed the Anglo-Florentine tradition; when it became clear that he would not reach the literary heights of his early promise, he abandoned fiction and turned to scholarship. Distressed at the spread of Fascism in Italy, he left the country in 1932 after publishing *The Last Medici*. After travelling in south-east Asia he settled in Peking where he refined his aesthetic sensibilities on opium, Buddhism and oriental courtesy till the threat of war in 1939 forced him back to Europe. Contributing to the war effort he made a lecture tour of Italy to promote the Anglo-Italian relationship, but was unable to prevent Italy from joining the war on the axis side.

---

[657] Ibid., p. 39. Elsewhere in his memoirs however, he reveals a selective blindness on the part of the foreign population; though their contact with local Italians was limited, Acton, Berenson, Lee and most other members of the community knew such international figures as Leonel Venturi, professor of aesthetics at Turin University, who having openly refused to concede the obligatory pledge of loyalty to the Fascists, was fired from his job.

While it is tempting to attribute some of La Pietra's baroque exuberance to the younger Acton, Harold had nothing to do with the design and furnishing of either villa or garden.[658] He was the guardian of the estate and he spent his later life protecting, preserving and promoting both the villa and the culture that created it. Acton described himself as 'the last aesthete'; after Berenson's death in 1959 he clearly felt the responsibility for preserving the values of the Anglo-Florentine community.[659]

Under Harold Acton's stewardship, La Pietra's gardens softened as trees grew unchecked, topiary went uncut and self-seeded flowers proliferated. Acton was more interested in scholarship than horticulture and his real homage to his patrimony was *Tuscan Villas*, a study of local villas which ends with the impassioned plea that they be rescued from the neglect to which many had already succumbed.[660]

On his death in 1994 Acton bequeathed the estate with its five villas to New York University, to be used for academic purposes. The five grandchildren of his father's putative mistress, Ersilia Beaccis, are currently claiming the share of Arthur Acton's estate (valued at between 100 and 500 million dollars) that would be their due in law if his paternity can be proved. Meanwhile New York University is engaged in a massive fifteen-million dollar restoration project, and the archives remain closed to scholars till they are fully catalogued, a process which has been extended several times.

---

[658] *Brideshead Revisited*, p. 27.
[659] He was, indeed preoccupied with the ends of things and, like Sitwell, he appeared to be fascinated by decline, decrepitude and extinction as indicated such books as *The Last Medici* (1932) and *The Last Bourbons of Naples* (1961).
[660] Acton, *Villas*, p. 270.

XIX. A Scholarly Retreat: Bernard Berenson's I Tatti

I Tatti is probably the best known of the Anglo-Florentine gardens. For a century it owed its fame largely to its owner, Bernard Berenson, a Faustian figure of whom it was said he was so gifted that he could have been God, but he chose, instead, to be Mephistopheles.[661] Increasingly in the twenty-first century, however, I Tatti has attracted attention because of Cecil Pinsent, the architect whose first Italian project was to transform this simple farmhouse into an elegant villa and garden. With its baroque façade, English flower beds, Renaissance parterres, grass walks, formal forest and flowery meadows I Tatti demonstrates the early twentieth-century interpretation of classical Italian horticulture.

Berenson arrived in Florence in 1888 with a Harvard degree and a commission from his patron, Isabella Stewart Gardner, to acquire Italian art for her private collection. Triply disqualified from the American establishment by his Jewish ancestry, his Lithuanian origins and his liaison with a married woman, Mary Costelloe, Berenson's best chance for success was in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Europe.[662] Drawn to Florence by its store of Renaissance art he settled, like a Medici grandee, in the hills north of the city. Like Arthur Acton he built up his own collection and dealt, discretely, in art works while advising private collectors and public galleries. He also used his scholarship to attribute paintings for dealers. Following the work of the Italian scholar Giovanni Morelli and his assistant Giovanni Cavalcaselle, Berenson evolved a scientific method of stylistic analysis.

Focussing on the paintings themselves rather than their provenance - written documentation, and anecdotal evidence - he examined such features as brushwork, and concentrated on details such as the treatment of eyes, ears, hands and drapery. By thus building up a physiological profile of the artist, Berenson could offer more accurate attributions than had previously been possible. In later years Berenson's credibility was

[661] The image is attributed to the playwright SN Behrman, Secrest, *Being Bernard Berenson*, p. 15.
[662] The sister of Logan Pearsall Smith, Mary left her barrister husband and two children in 1891 to be with Berenson

undermined by the revelation that he was kept on large retainer by the dealer, Joseph Duveen, nonetheless his promotion of early Renaissance artists virtually created the market for their works, which hitherto, through lack of exposure and the inability to authenticate, had been virtually non-existent.[663]

Berenson first rented I Tatti in 1900 after the death of her Catholic husband freed Mary to marry him and legitimize their union. The villa's unusual name is probably a corruption of *Zatti*, the family which owned the farm in sixteenth century. By the late nineteenth century I Tatti had entered the Anglo-Florentine community, as one of the properties in the estate of Temple Leader whose double 'L' monograph still adorns the main gate on the Vincigliata road.[664] By 1907 Berenson was enormously successful and sufficient wealthy to purchase I Tatti. Twenty-eight thousand dollars bought him the main house, outbuildings, several farms and fifty acres of land, though the villa's rooms were small and it had only basic plumbing and electricity.

Like most Anglo-Florentines, the Berensons demanded a greater degree comfort and hygiene than their Italian forebears so they set about altering the villa. From small beginnings – an upstairs bathroom for Mary and a library for BB – as he was widely known, the alterations multiplied. In her effort to keep Berenson's young assistant Geoffrey Scott nearby while allaying her husband's jealousy, Mary convinced Cecil Pinsent to form a partnership with Scott, then kept the team employed with an ever extending list of projects.[665] Within three years the expenditure had topped $100,000 and friends began referring to the villa as 'BB's folly'.[666] Young and inexperienced, the team - which Mary dubbed The Firm, or The Infirm when they were out of favour - was

---

[663] Acton observed that Duveen flooded New York with masterpieces, 'authenticated by Bernard Berenson, which lent them added interest from our point of view. For Berenson was the omniscient sage of Settignano, whose intellect was so clear that others dimmed beside it,'; he added, presciently, 'the emigration of European masterpieces was on so fast a scale that one could foresee a future in which Europeans would have to go to America to study art...'Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 96.

[664] Judith Chatfield, *The Classic Italian Garden*, Rizzoli, New York, 1991, p. 101.

[665] Mariano attributes to Mary the responsibility for transforming I Tatti from modest house into grand villa. 'Keen on creating work for her two pets Geoffrey Scott and Cecil Pinsent, Mary had probably been the initiator of it all,' adding that the original farmhouse better suited BB's 'conservative nature.' Mariano, p. 137.

[666] Fantoni etc., p. 41.

slow, sloppy and inefficient, incurring enormous cost overruns which Mary had to disguise from her irascible husband.[667]

While the grounds are often attributed to Berenson, in the absence of any documentary evidence to prove who designed them, Pinsent seems the most likely candidate. As The Firm was virtually living on site any discussions were probably had face to face, and any formal documentation on Pinsent's part was disposed of in his regular purging of his papers. Nonetheless in November 1909 Aubrey Waterfield, in a letter to his wife, claims: 'Pinsent has already drawn a plan for the garden and he professes where plants are to go.'[668] The letters in I Tatti's archive reinforce the idea that Pinsent was the main designer; they also suggest that the garden, like the villa, was Mary's domain. Scott's biographer Richard Dunn claims that Berenson only discovered a garden was being planned when Scott unwittingly showed him the designs during Mary's absence.[669] Though it is unlikely that the garden could have proceeded without Berenson's approval, a letter from Mary to her siblings, dated 21 October 1911 encloses a vivid sketch of the gardens, reinforcing the idea that she was its instigator and overseer.[670]

The grounds at I Tatti were a difficult commission for a novice designer as the villa is awkwardly sited in steep agricultural land, midway down a sloping hillside. Mariano described it before the renovations as 'an unassuming well-proportioned Tuscan house with a small enclosed lemon garden to the south and groups of old cypresses to both sides of it.'[671] To the east a line of cypresses had been stranded when the main road was moved, in the late nineteenth century, to lessen the grade of the slope. Pinsent added a parallel line of cypresses to create a shady walk from the villa down to the old gated entrance at bottom of the property, a feature which may well have been inspired

---

[667] Mariano recalls Pinsent 'being rather casual in his estimated expense and BB being suddenly confronted with bills far exceeding his calculation' but notes 'as BB knew that Cecil had no intention of cheating him. He just lacked the ability to keep his accounts in order.' Mariano, p. 31.
[668] Ross's papers at the British Institute, Florence; file marked: WAT:I:F:4; ff 1-13
[669] Fantoni etc. p. 41.
[670] Fantoni, p. 49.
[671] Mariano, p .7

by the long grass walk at the Villa Gamberaia nearby.[672] When the main entrance was moved to the side of the villa during renovations, the grass walk was crowned with a sculptural staircase linking it to the driveway above. The driveway façade of the staircase provides a three-arched niche surmounted by an exuberant naked sculpture while the garden side preserves the cool serenity of the grass walk with a simple pool flanked by arum lilies in a composition which suggests both medieval annunciations and art deco boldness. In 1916, on the west side of the villa, Pinsent designed an ornate baroque terrace off the library, with an elaborate wall fountain and a parterre of low box beds [84]. Beside this an ilex walk cuts across the agricultural terraces to an open, ironwork temple in the field below.

While the ilex walk has been attributed to Berenson, and the baroque terrace suggests Scott's influence, it is the formal garden at the front of the villa that Pinsent's hand is most evident.[673] Here, in 1910, he transformed the sloping lemon garden into a wide terrace for afternoon tea, with two levels of flanking beds to satisfy Mary's longing for English flowers. Beyond the long, horizontal *limonaia* at the bottom of this area Pinsent created the Green Garden, a half-acre formal space enclosed in the tall green hedges which were to become one of his signature features [85].

With its juxtaposing of sun and shade, open and closed spaces, formality and naturalism, here, more than anywhere in the grounds, Pinsent imitated his early Renaissance forebears, exploring the intersection of art and nature, the man-made and the natural. Terracing the rocky slope he created four shallow parterres descending to a pair of still pools. Each parterre is enclosed within double hedges and filled with symmetrical pairs of low box borders whose geometric forms are similar but not identical. The drop from *limonaia* to Green Garden is bridged with a double staircase curving round a niche filled with the unlikely image of Our Lady and flanked by an

[672] In a letter to his wife Waterfield describes the plan for 'a long grass viale with cypresses, something like the Gamberaia running past the house as a short cut to the road'. Aubrey to Lina Waterfield, Waterfield Papers, Janet Ross Archive, British Institute, Florence; WAT:1:F:4:ff 1-13, 8 November 1909.
[673] 'Berenson...certainly planted the handsome ilex avenue', Quest-Ritson, p. 128.

even less likely pair of winsome stone puppy and kitten carrying baskets of fruit.[674] A second double staircase leads from the Green Garden to a small ilex *bosco*, designed to screen the mill-house behind.[675] A statue of Flora presides at the back of the *bosco*, while the trees themselves are cut low so as not to obscure the view of the countryside beyond. Transforming chaotic nature into architectural form, Pinsent laid out his bosco in straight, ordered lines as he filled his parterres with geometric patterns.[676] Bisecting the Green Garden a central axis runs through the curved arch of the *limonaia*, linking the villa above to the woodland below.

Quest-Ritson describes the Green Garden as 'Pinsent's first and most successful attempt to re-create an early Renaissance garden' before going on to complain that Pinsent had absorbed the detail but not the substance, creating 'a sequence of incidents that fail to coalesce'.[677] One could certainly argue that the formal garden is too grand for the villa while not quite grand enough for the intricate detail of its design, but I believe such infelicities are more to do with inexperience than lack of comprehension.[678]

Similarly the overall design, with its simple grass walk, its baroque west terrace, its early Renaissance formal parterres, its vibrant flower beds and naturalistic wildflower meadow could be condemned as incoherent. Or it could simply reveal the architect's inability to control the egos competing to shape the garden as Mary fought for English exuberance and Berenson for Italian austerity. Indeed, unknown to Pinsent, Mary hired the unfortunate Aubrey Waterfield who thought he was going to design the whole garden and ended up simply planting the meadows. Writing to his wife, Lina,

---

[674] Though there is a 1930s kitschness about these features, they are so out of place I assume they must have been gifts which the Berensons felt obliged to display.

[675] Waterfield wrote to his wife: 'Pinsent proposes to hide the mill with a wood and move the pond opposite the stanzone to obliterate any sense of the mill', suggesting that the base of the slope where the bosco now stands was originally a mill pond. The mill house itself was redeployed as a lodge for the gardener. Waterfield letters, Janet Ross archives, British Institute, Florence, WAT:I: F:4:ff 1-13, November 8, 1909

[676] Though the symmetrical patterns are similar, no two are the same, suggesting perhaps a precocious appreciation for what Charles Jencks has described as nature's penchant for self-similar but non identical patterns.

[677] Quest-Ritson, p. 127.

[678] In his letter of 20 November 1909 Waterfield notes that he has 'shortened the formal garden by half' This revelation that Pinsent's original plans were drastically curtailed may explain why the design is perhaps too grandiose for the space.

Waterfield reveals the intrigue at I Tatti. On 8 November 1909 he writes: 'BB and Pinsent think a garden should have no flowers in it... Poor little me, the only position to take is one of abject humility otherwise an impasse... I explained to Mary the difficulty this morning and they evidently want me to have a sort of hand in it. But it is a bit ignominious at present.'[679] Three weeks later he writes enclosing a sketch of Pinsent's plan: 'any architectural garden [Pinsent] regards rightly, as mostly the architect's business only this house is not a villa... and though the garden should be on formal lines it must be a country affair and not on the lines of the villa d'Este [86]'.[680] Soon after, Pinsent writes to Mary making no reference to Waterfield, but revealing his own insecurity when he reports: the garden is 'genuinely successful now that it has been tidied [and]... will not be a failure after all.'[681]

While Wharton defined the typical Italian garden as a combination of 'marble, water and perennial verdure', Pinsent's work at I Tatti reflects the specific Tuscan vernacular, featuring marble and verdure, but, except for a few minor fountains, virtually ignoring water, despite the fact that the steep site could have accommodated all manner of cascades and *giocci*. This is a pointed departure from the baroque style where the influence of the Moorish gardens of Sicily and Spain inspired complex water steps, chains, cascades, fountains, ponds and pools. Pinsent clearly had little sympathy with the sixteenth-century designers who transformed the garden into an increasingly artificial sphere with hydraulics, automata, exotic plants, ornate parterres and iconographic programmes.

So successful was Pinsent's design that in 1911 Arthur Acton commissioned him to do a small *contadini* house for his villa. Though ultimately this joined the list of 'schemes not carried out', it demonstrates how quickly Pinsent's reputation spread through the Anglo-Florentine community.[682] Not everyone appreciated Pinsent's efforts however.

---

[679] Waterfield to Lina Waterfield, in Janet Ross letters at British Institute, Florence; WAT:I:F:4:ff 1-13, 8 November 1909.
[680] Ibid.,20 November 1909. Despite Mary's promise, Waterfield had only the sloping fields to plant up as a naturalistic garden, and that he did so effectively that few are aware they were planted at all.
[681] CP-MB 3.11.11.
[682] 'A Record of the works of Cecil Pinsent in Tuscany', Galletti, *Pinsent and His Gardens In Italy*, p. 65

Kenneth Clark, an early assistant of Berenson, carefully distanced the great man from the villa, which he considered pompous and vulgar. His diary asserts: 'Mrs. B. thought the house was not imposing enough and she determined to add a central clock tower...she secretly commissioned Pinsent to design one and join it somehow while BB was away', [23] adding that on his return Berenson ordered it to be removed immediately, 'but this proved impractical so the tower is still there.'[683] Clark also suggests that Pinsent and Mary designed what he contemptuously calls 'the imitation baroque garden' which he claimed Berenson always disliked.[684]

Whatever Berenson may have suggested to his young assistant, in later life he laid claim to the much admired garden. In his 1949 *Sketch for a Self Portrait*, Berenson averred: 'Although I had so gifted an architect as Cecil Pinsent who so often understood my wants better than I did, it half killed me to get it [the garden] into shape... now after many years I love it as much as one can love any object or complex of objects not human', adding later, 'though I have travelled all over the world and seen many lovely places I now feel all the beauty I need is in my own garden'.[685]

Clark's contempt for the garden might reflect an inability to appreciate that it was, at the time, in its infancy; Mariano also notes that when she first saw the garden it looked 'out of proportion, the statues in the new formal garden ridiculously large as compared with the tiny box and cypress hedges. The long cypress avenue, the first addition made by the Berensons, was growing up well but looked puny against the majestic old cypresses near the house.'[686]

Sylvia Sprigge, a friend of Berenson and frequent guest at I Tatti, extols Pinsent's foresight: 'Cecil Pinsent, the gentlest of men, with a powerful imagination about plants, trees, views and flowers, performed the miracle of laying out the garden at I Tatti in such a way that after fifty years of steady growth, the sight of its evergreen spaces in the

[683] Sprigge confirms this attribution, describing it as 'the clock which Mary had build into the stone cornice over the centre of the façade', p. 202
[684] Bowe, 'I Tatti', *Country Life*, 5 July, 1990, p 93.
[685] NY, Pantheon, quoted: Bowe, 'I Tatti', *Country Life*, 5 July, 1990, p. 93.
[686] Mariano, p. 7.

heart of the Tatti landscape was as varied and as satisfying as a Bach fugue'.[687] As she walked the garden with Pinsent several times it is not unlikely that this vivid analogy was evolved with him, or at least with his approval. Sprigge also describes how Pinsent conceived the garden as one in which 'a man might take a fairly long and varied walk passing from one landscape and mood to another, not with violent change but imperceptibly', with a choice of routes, 'again imperceptibly suggested – few paths, no fences.'[688]

Acton, in an oft-quoted passage, described I Tatti as 'Anglo-fiorentino' by which he meant: 'the proportions, and also the meticulous precision of the details are more English than Florentine.' Elsewhere he carps, 'its Tuscan elements have been cleverly adapted rather than absorbed. The scale as well as the dainty precision of the details is more English than Florentine.'[689] Implicitly Acton suggests that his own villa is more authentically Italian. As the gardens of I Tatti and La Pietra were exact contemporaries, they make an interesting comparison. I Tatti was a farmhouse with gentle views as opposed to the grand villa with magnificent views at La Pietra. While both were created by men with enormous wealth, there is a unity about La Pietra since it was overseen by a single patron where I Tatti has several warring tastes at work. Though both enjoy the variety of moods and styles of the best of the Italian gardens, there is a vulgarity, a sense of spectacle and display at La Pietra which is lacking in the smaller, more domestic spaces of I Tatti. While La Pietra has all the pomp of the baroque garden, I Tatti displays the humility and humanity of the early Renaissance.

David Watkin has described Pinsent's work as 'modest and of a Tuscan vernacular style'.[690] Pinsent called it 'modern gardening in the Italian style'. However one defines it, I Tatti's key features - wide terraces; simple geometric parterres; vine-covered pergolas; high, wide, enclosing hedges; *limonaia* and wooded groves - became Pinsent hallmarks. Its owners' increasing fame and fortune helped preserve the villa through

---

[687] Sprigge, Sylvia, *Berenson: a Biography*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1960, p. 201.
[688] Sprigge, p. 201.
[689] Acton, *Villas*, p. 170.
[690] In his introduction to Geoffrey Scott's *The Architecture of Humanism*, Fn 1; p xiii.

the two world wars. In the late 1920s Nichols described I Tatti as having 'a particularly delightful atmosphere'. Her observation that 'Both Mr. and Mrs. Berenson have a keen sense of beauty that finds expression in their immediate environment' suggests that at that time at least, Mary's contribution to the villa was acknowledged.[691]

After Mary's death in 1945 Berenson lived on in the care of his devoted assistant Nicky Mariano. Dubbed 'the Sage of Settignano' he became one of the sights on the cultural tour of Florence, a role he shared with Harold Acton.[692] On his death he was buried next to Mary in the small chapel at I Tatti. He bequeathed the estate to Harvard University which has maintained the gardens impeccably, and they continue to provide solace to generations of Renaissance scholars.

[691] Nichols, p. 244.
[692] Acton, *Memoirs*, p. 96.

XX. A Philosopher's Retreat: Charles Strong's Le Balze

Pinsent's second major horticultural project, and his only complete house and garden in Italy, is the villa he created for the American philosopher Charles Strong. Le Balze, *The Bluffs*, named for the cliff on which it is situated, demonstrates Pinsent's early appreciation of architectural space, indeed some believe it is Pinsent's finest work.[693] Despite the steep, narrow site Pinsent combined classical formality with English modesty to create a series of buttressed terraces, supporting several formal gardens, a grotto, a bosco and a large olive grove.

Yet another eccentric, Italophile outcast, Strong proved an ideal client. The atheist son of a Baptist minister, he had married John D Rockefeller's daughter Bessie, who died in 1906 leaving him wealthy and desolate. Retreating to Italy, Strong found solace in Fiesole's fourteenth-century monastery of San Girolamo where, five centuries earlier, Cosimo de Medici had been so enraptured by the views that he had brought adjacent property for his Villa Medici. Similarly enchanted, Strong bought a barren plot below the monastery, a vertiginous piece of land with spectacular views of the Arno valley. On the advice of his Harvard friend, Berenson, Strong hired the twenty-seven year old Pinsent to design and build a simple villa.

Like I Tatti, Le Balze looks to the early Renaissance ideal, celebrating the harmony between man and nature. The parterres are filled with grass rather than colourful gravel or exotic plants; statuary is minimal and water effects are simple. Unlike his Renaissance forbears however, Pinsent hid the spectacular views behind tall yew hedges, cutting frames so the landscape is only glimpsed tantalizingly – a trick employed by later Modernist designers such as Oliver Hill at Joldwyns in Surrey.

Another deviation from the traditional formula is in the approach. Where Renaissance villas were generally reached from below, so the elegance of the architecture and its

[693] The architectural historian Alan Grieco, in conversation with the author, May 2006 asserted that Le Balze is Pinsent's finest work.

relationship to the landscape could be best appreciated, Pinsent was constrained by the narrow width and extended depth of his site. He decided to put the main entrance to Le Balze at the back of the building, providing a small service gate from the rural path above, and creating a grander public access from the main road, via a raised, wisteria-clad pergola. Crowded against the slope of the hill the pergola leads to a double staircase which descends to the level of the villa [**87**]. An experienced architect might have devised a more comfortable entrance, but Pinsent's elevated walk provides drama and variety as glimpses of the countryside alternate with intimate views into the garden rooms below.

For the central dwelling Pinsent created a simple Palladian villa, flanked on each side by a formal garden, with a narrow front terrace opening onto the spectacular 180 degree panorama. To the east, overlooked by Strong's bedroom loggia, is the *giardino segreto* - a square space round a circular pool with a large potted camellia in the centre [**61**]. Jasmine provides scent, while pots of azaleas and camellias offer seasonal colour, supplemented by narrow, monochromatic beds of zinnias and dahlias – whose architectonic forms and solid colours reveal a modernist sensibility. An arch leads from this contained space to open reaches of the terrace beyond.

To the west, leading off Strong's study, is an austere green space enclosed by high hedges and bisected by paths. A small window cut in the corner reveals glimpses of the open front terrace, while an arch in hedge at the end leads to the formal *bosco*. While recalling the woods Pinsent had recently created at I Tatti, this ordered arrangement of evergreen ilexes also suggests the groves of classical philosophers, a nod, to the owner's profession. From here the eye is drawn to a niche in the rock at the end of the property, housing a mysterious cloaked figure. Though there is no reference to this in the pamphlets published by the estate, the sculpture resembles a steadfast philosopher – a further reference to Strong's independence and solitude?

By 1919 Strong was confined to a wheelchair, so when the neighbouring property to the east was put up for sale he acquired it to allow direct access to the villa from the main

road, the Via Vecchia Fiesolana. Once again he commissioned Pinsent to design the new entrance and rethink the journey round the estate. In the newly acquired space Pinsent created a formal garden with potted citrus trees enclosing a forum created from high, pleached trees. Known as the Orange Garden, this area was originally planned as an orange grove and the villino on the site was turned into a *limonaia* with its flat roof forming a loggia for the existing, upper entrance.

In the Orange Garden Pinsent made much use of *ciottolato*, a traditional paving technique in which complex patterns are created from coloured pebbles. Though he had first used it, discretely, on the central axis of I Tatti's Green Garden, at Le Balze Pinsent employed *ciottolato* to line a grotto at one end, to form an urn at the other and more traditionally, to pave the ground, creating a vibrant surface. At this time Pinsent also created the elaborate grotto at the base of the staircase from the upper pergola [**88**]. Sited opposite the villa's main entrance, the grotto humidifies the air while filling the central hall with sparkling light and the cooling sound of water. Here a spouting Triton strides a dolphin in a tufa niche, adorned with busts of philosophers, beneath a fecund Venus, the whole confection being flanked by charming portrait medallions of Pinsent and Strong.[694]

The playful exuberance of the later grotto and Orange Garden is unusual in Pinsent's work, and these features seem a little discordant with the rest of the grounds. Indeed Nichols says of the grotto: 'it would have shocked most critics a few years ago before the revival of imitation stalactites had come into vogue', suggesting that even in the late 1920s it seemed out of place.[695] Nearly a decade after creating the original gardens, Pinsent appears to be experimenting with styles, adding a touch of whimsy to the austere, intellectual air of the villa.

Le Balze demonstrates Pinsent's increasing ability to manipulate an awkward space. Inspired, no doubt, by the example of the Villa Medici next door, Pinsent transformed a

[694] Despite their reverence for classical precedent, the Anglo-Florentine garden-makers made little use of symbolism, reflecting, perhaps, the modernist rejection of such elitist approaches.
[695] Nichols, p. 254.

steep narrow site to create a harmonious relationship between dwelling, gardens and surrounding landscape. The Villa Gamberaia nearby, a favourite among the Anglo-Florentine community, was also, doubtless, an inspiration: its multiple styles and moods, its interplay of long and short axes, and its dramatic disclosure of views are all features which Pinsent employed at Le Balze. With his processional entry, parallel axes and tantalizing framed views, he created a sense of space and variety in the modest plot, incorporating closed rooms and open terraces, stippled light and dark shadow, distant vistas and intimate scenes, long, horizontal axes and sharp vertical descents. As the site was too steep to allow symmetry, he was forced to create a series of different spatial episodes while integrating the villa into the historic slope through a unifying sequence of rooms. Indeed, referring to Le Balze, Jellicoe declared Pinsent 'a maestro in placing buildings in the landscape'.[696]

Though Strong could have bought any number of existing Renaissance villas, his decision to build something new suggests a shift in the Anglo-Florentine attitude; rather than simply buying a chunk of the past he was willing to create something new and of its time. This provided an extraordinary opportunity for Pinsent to develop his style. Tempering classical formality with modernist simplicity he created neither recreation nor restoration, nor indeed, pastiche. In Le Balze Pinsent honed his idea of the modern Italian horticulture, creating a modest sized, varied, ordered, evergreen space, requiring limited maintenance. With its classical lines, human scale and contemporary simplicity, it is one of his most successful designs.

Below the main terrace, a less formal garden incorporates palms, bamboo, agave and other fashionable exotics. Beneath this, hay fields are filled with peach, lilac, willow and Judas trees, giving way to olive groves punctuated with towering cypresses. These stately emblems of divinity contrast with the mundane olives, continuing the dialogue between wilderness and civilization, chaos and order, the sacred and the profane, which animates the garden above.

---

[696] Quoted in Daniela *Lamberini*: 'The Future of Cecil Pinsent's Garden Architecture', *Cecil Pinsent and his Gardens in Tuscany*, EDIFIR, Florence, 1996, p. 120.

In 1940, just before Italy entered the Second World War, Strong died in the villa, in the company of his servants and chauffeur. Having survived requisition by the German military, Le Balze was damaged in 1944 by allied bombs which destroyed parts of the villa, *villino*, garden wall and various trees. During a spell in Florence as an officer of the British Army's Monuments, Fine Arts and Archive Commission, Pinsent managed to visit Le Balze and was able to advise on repairs. After the war the property remained uninhabited till 1979 when Georgetown University purchased it from Strong's daughter. The university restored the gardens impeccably, and today, as the centre of Georgetown's European Studies programme, Le Balze continues to be philosopher's garden housing America's academic elite.

XXI. A Humanist Garden: Sybil Cutting's Villa Medici, Fiesole

While working on Le Balze, Pinsent was invited to help with the restoration of the famous Villa Medici across the road [8]. Celebrated as the first ever humanist villa, the Villa Medici featured large in the Anglo-Florentine imagination, especially as much of history had been passed in the ownership of eccentric English expatriates. Its gardens, extending over several of the former agricultural terraces, occupy an enormous space compared with the size of the villa, and their layout influenced the development of Italian horticulture, inspiring, among other things, the gardens of the Palazzo Piccolomini which Pope Pio II created in Pienza in 1485.[697] Biagio d'Antonio's late-fifteenth-century *Annunciation,* which depicts the villa through the Virgin's open window, shows a terrace stretching out from the ground floor loggia and a lower grassy strip against a steep buttressing wall [89]. By the twentieth century however, the villa had three separate gardens. Though ultimately Pinsent contributed more to the interior comfort of the villa than to its exterior embellishments, his work on the grounds helped hone his horticultural style and established his reputation as the best designer to interpret Renaissance traditions for a modern English clientele.

In the late 1920s, Nichols extolled: 'apart from its wonderful historical associations the Villa Medici di Fiesole would be unforgettable for its outstanding beauty.'[698] This expresses the view of travellers, historians and garden lovers down the ages. Designed by Cosimo's favourite architect Michelozzi, the villa was built about 1458 for Cosimo's son Giovanni. Unlike the other Medici villas of a similar date, Cafaggio and Tribbio, Villa Medici was not developed as part of an agricultural estate; created solely and specifically for intellectual and artistic pursuits, it reflects the budding humanist sensibilities of the time. Carved from the same steep slope as Le Balze across the Via Vecchia Fiesolana, Vasari described the villa as 'a splendid and noble palace'

[697] Hobhouse, p. 87.
[698] Nichols, p. 103.

explaining that its foundations were sunk at very great expense into the hill to create cellars, storerooms and stables.[699]

Michelozzi's engineering triumph left the villa perched on the cliff edge open to magnificent views of the Arno valley, the city of Florence and the surrounding Cararra range, perfectly fulfilling Alberti's maxim that a villa should overlook a city or plain 'bounded by familiar mountains', with a 'delicacy of gardens' in the foreground.[700] The precarious site did not find favour with all its visitors however; in 1779, after dining at the villa, the English traveller Henry Swinburne complained that the villa was 'too high, too much confined and on a rock which reflects a burning heat in summer'.[701]

In contrast to the contemporary norm of defensive towers with deep, impenetrable walls and random accretions, this villa was designed to a strict orthogonal plan, reflecting the growing fascination with geometry. Its square windows were framed in the local grey *pietra serena* stone while two loggias inserted into the mass of the facades absorb the countryside into the body of the dwelling. The villa soon surpassed Careggi to become the favourite Medici villa. It was here, in 1478, that the Pazzi family intended to assassinate their hosts, Cosimo grandsons, at a banquet.[702] When the evening was cancelled after Giuliano suffered 'an inflammation of the eyes', the Pazzis struck the following morning in the cathedral; Giuliano was murdered, but Lorenzo escaped to see the assassins executed. The villa passed to Lorenzo and soon became the gathering place of the Platonic Academy, which numbered among its members Marsilio Ficino,

---

[699] Acton, *Villas*, p. 45. Intriguingly, Hobhouse suggests that the buttressing walls supporting the garden terraces were 'intended to resemble the Hanging Gardens of Babylon', though she gives no reference for this assertion. Hobhouse, *Gardens of Italy*, p. 74.

[700] Cosimo owned one of the few copies of *Varro's De Re Rustica* from which Alberti drew heavily: Dale V Kent, *Cosimo de Medici and the Florentine Renaissance*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2000, p. 299. Athough Alberti's book was not published until 1485, it was written as early as 1452; in any case Cosimo would have been aware of Alberti's ideas, being one of his major patrons.

[701] Acton, Tuscan Villas, p. 46.

[702] Atlee, among others, claims that in 1458 Cosimo purchased the property known as 'Belcanto', from Niccolo Baldi then hired Michelozzi to transform it into an elegant retreat. (Atlee, p. 203) Most authorities however, including Acton, Masson and Wharton, assert that Michelozzi built the villa from scratch. This seems the more likely scenario, given the villa's dramatic site and novel design.

Cristoforo Landino, Angelo Poliziano and Pico della Mirandola - the young protégé whom Poliziano described as 'the Phoenix who nested in the Medici laurel'.[703]

As tutor to Lorenzo's sons Poliziano composed his *Rusticus* at the villa; in a delightful letter he begs Ficino to join him: 'There is an abundance of water here, and, as we are on the edge of a valley, but little sun, and the wind is certainly never lacking. The villa itself lies off the road, in a dense wood, but commands a view of the whole city, and although the district is thickly populated I enjoy that solitude dear to those who have fled from town'.[704] Indeed Luhan pointed out that the villas of Fiesole and Settignano, being suburban villas and built for permanent residence rather than summer retreat, faced south to get the winter sun, unlike more rural villas which tended to face north or east to ensure shade during the hot summer months when the owners would visit.[705]

With the growing taste for baroque opulence, later Medici generations grew less enchanted with the austere villa, and in 1671, soon after acceding to power, Cosimo III de' Medici sold the villa to the del Sera family for 4,000 florins.[706] A century later, in 1772, the villa entered the English community when it was purchased by Lady Orford. After a brief marriage to Sir Robert Walpole's eldest son, this eccentric heiress left her husband and young son, eventually settling in Florence where she accumulated lovers, dressed like a Venetian courtesan and plagued the English Minister, Sir Horace Mann. When her profligate son faced ruin in England she refused to visit him claiming age and infirmity, though the Minister wryly noted 'she rides for some hours every morning, and is in continual motion the rest of the day, by which she maintains a vivacity not common at her age'.[707]

In 1780 Orford had the villa embellished by the Italian architect Gasparo Paoletti. Overlaying the fifteenth-century simplicity with the rather eclectic Rococo taste of the time, he introduced the famous Chinese wallpaper so beloved of its Edwardian owner,

---

[703] Cartwright, p. 16.
[704] Ibid., p. 17.
[705] Luhan, p. 134.
[706] Isabella Ballerini, *The Medici Villas*, Giunti, Firenze Musei, Florence, 2003, p .81.
[707] Acton, *Villas*, p. 46.

Sybil Cutting. More drastically, Paoletti moved the main entrance from the Via Vecchia Fiesolana to the recently constructed Via Beato Angelico. While his new carriage drive, winding through oak woodlands, made a more dramatic entrance it altered both the internal organisation of the villa and the garden surrounds. Paoletti also added a belvedere to the left of the new entrance avenue to frame the views of the city [90] and an elegant *limonaia* against the back wall of the upper terrace to over-winter prized citruses and other tender plants [91]. Hitherto the citruses had been espaliered against the buttressing wall of the lower terrace where they could absorb the sun's heat in clement weather while being protected from winter frosts by portable, lean-to shelters of wickerwork or wooden slats. The *limonaia* allowed for the introduction of further potted citruses, camellias, azaleas, and such tender exotics as melaranci or bitter oranges, *Citrus Aurantium* and *limoncelli* and *Citrus limon* '*Neapolitanum*'.[708]

On her death, Lady Orford left the villa to her young lover, Cavalier Mozzi. Though he married soon after and sold the villa to a Sienese family, his brief tenancy was recorded in the list of names by which the villa has been known. In the nineteenth century the villa returned once again to the English community when it became known as the Villa Spence after its owner, William Blundell Spence.[709] Despite the change in name, the villa was still closely associated with its illustrious forebears; Paget reported dining with Mr. Spence 'at his Medicean villa', noting that after dinner they sat 'on the terrace there the Pazzi had plotted against the lives of Lorenzo and Giulio di Medici'.[710]

It is Spence who established the art-dealing tradition which was imitated by Ross, Berenson and Acton in the following century. Arriving in Florence to study art, he survived as a copyist in the galleries, supplementing his income by dealing in art works, guiding English visitors around the galleries and introducing them to famous artists. After marrying into the Florentine aristocracy he was able to purchase the Villa Medici,

---

[708] Mariachiara Pozzana, *Gardens of Florence and Tuscany*, Giunti, Florence, 2001, p. 82.
[709] Among the villa's nineteenth-century inhabitants was Fanny Waugh Hunt (1833-1866) who died in childbirth after one year of marriage in the rented villa. She now rests in the English Cemetery in a tomb designed by her husband, Holman Hunt, one of the founders of the Pre Raphaelite Brotherhood.
[710] Paget, *Linings*, p. 140.

in which illustrious setting he displayed his wares to their best advantage to newly rich visitors keen to acquire respectability by acquiring ancient art and artifacts.

A generous host and passable painter, Spence wrote a guide to the city, hung his self-portrait in the Uffizi, and carried on the tradition of hospitality associated with the villa. In 1865, to suit the larger carriages of the Victorian age, he widened the entrance avenue; during these works a section of Etruscan wall was revealed, which he duly celebrated with a plaque [2].

After Spence's death in 1897, the villa was purchased by Colonel Harry Macalmon, an enigmatic figure whose only apparent effect on the villa was to increase the height of the northern boundary walls to ensure greater privacy.[711] While there are few descriptions of the garden in this period, Paget cryptically records a visit as 'one glow of giant chrysanthemums; the lawn smooth and green,' though she was put off by the social life and left soon after arriving.[712] In 1905 Latham was too enchanted with the villa's humanist connections to comment on its current state, but he did provide two photos of the eastern front which show the loggia brightly decorated with Roman grotesques, the villa walls adorned with medallions and polychrome decorations, and pots of flowers clustering round the loggia columns. A longer shot shows the grass terraces flanked with potted citrus, while the narrow, stepped garden to the side has wired columns to support climbing roses, still evident today [8].

The early-twentieth-century façade was much more exuberant than austere face presented today, nonetheless that same year Luhan observed: 'the severity and the rigid symmetry, the proportion of height to length and breadth prohibited grace and ease in spite of its stately elegance.'[713] Luhan was unusual in seeking a villa with an abundance of sunshine; she notes that most villas were deliberately built facing north or east for coolness in summer, but while the villas of Fiesole, Settignano and San

[711] Even his name is uncertain, appearing in variously as Mac Calman, Mac Calmont and Macalmon.
[712] Paget, Tower, p. 412.
[713] Luhan, p. 134. In her memoirs thirty years later Luhan inaccurately described it as 'the Medici villa at Settignano', though this is clearly the villa she meant.

Domenico faced south to take advantage of the views over the city, these she rejected because they were too close together, 'all looking down on each other's red-tiled roofs and terraces and gardens from where they perched on the steep hillside.'[714] Eventually, however, the property was rented to another young widowed heiress, Lady Sybil Cutting.

In 1910, a year after the untimely death of her American diplomat husband, Cutting arrived in Florence fulfilling her husband's deathbed wish that their daughter be raised abroad; she rented the villa for a year before purchasing it. Cutting's daughter, Iris Origo recalled her introduction to the villa:

> I am not certain how it came about that my mother bought the Villa Medici... but I do remember the spring day on which... she took me for a drive up a long hill, first between high walls over which yellow banksias roses tumbled and a tangle of wisteria, then through olive groves opening to an ever wider view; and finally down a long drive over-shadowed by ilex trees to a terrace with two tall trees – paulownias – which had scattered on the lawn mauve flowers I had never seen before. At the end of the terrace stood a square house with a deep loggia looking due west towards the sunset over the whole valley of the Arno. There were three rooms papered with Chinese flowers and birds in brilliant colours, with gay tiles on upon the floors... This, then, until my marriage fourteen years later, became my home, and certainly no child could have had a more beautiful one.[715]

Inspired by his work at Le Balze next door, and with a recommendation, no doubt from her lover Berenson, Cutting hired Pinsent to renovate her villa and restore her garden. Cut into the hillside, the hanging garden retained its early Renaissance character, with long, narrow spaces echoing the agricultural terraces of the surrounding farmland. The top terrace, overlooked by the *piano nobile* and the elegant ground floor loggia, consisted of a large rectangular lawn divided in three sections each contained within simple stone curbs, punctuated with potted lemons and dominated by two huge *Paulownia tormentosa*. The enclosing wall to the north, which supports the highway above, is screened by climbing roses [92].

Twelve metres below the main terrace, a parallel terrace is laid out in the Italian style with a pergola on an intermediary level, linking the two areas. Masson, erroneously,

---

[714] Luhan, p. 134.
[715] Origo, *Images*, p. 113.

believed the pergola was part of the original layout, speculating that the only remnant of the original fifteenth-century design is the raised border along the pergola's retaining wall.[716] Nonetheless Biagio's *Annunciation* shows the pergola level as a narrow strip of earth with several trees screening the buttressing wall [89].[717] Buonaiuti's 1846 *Veduta dei Villa Mozzi* confirms that this arrangement hadn't changed by the mid nineteenth century [93].

In 1912, Le Blond described the 'forecourt with cypresses and a fountain' which would later become the *giardino segreto*; the lawn 'once, no doubt, a parterre laid out with flowers beds', and grottos flanking the paths on either side – presumably Paoletti's belvedere and the existing grotto. She reserves her praise however for the 'long cypress terrace, the glory of the grounds', presumably referring to the vestiges of an ancient *ragnaia* tucked away above the entrance drive. As she makes no reference to the lower garden, it must not yet have been created. The awkward approach to this level - accessible only by an interior staircase through the cellars, by steep steps from the south side of the villa or by a circuitous route from the western entrance demonstrates how quickly Renaissance designers moved on from Michelozzi's naïve efforts, learning to exploit steep sites with grand ramps and staircases.

After turning the narrow, lower grassy strip into a pergola, Pinsent created a second garden accessed from the centre of the pergola via a simple staircase. This space is simply adorned with four rectangular grass parterres, their edges punctuated by potted topiary cones, ranged round a central fountain. From the turning circle of the old entrance, he created a third garden to the west of the villa [94]. Here, as in the lowest terrace, Pinsent achieved an authentic fifteenth-century flavour; his little *giardino segreto* had plain box-edged beds round a simple oval fountain, with stone balusters cut from the corner of the boundary wall to frame the distant view of Florence.
Origo's recollection of the villa indicates that even though it was virtually a suburb of Florence, it managed to combine the elegance of a grand formal garden with the

[716] Masson, p .75.
[717] Accademia di San Luca, Rome.

picturesque quality of the agricultural landscape. 'Whenever I was free of my governesses I escaped into the garden, not to the formal terrace, with its box-edged beds and fountains where my mother took her guests, but to the dark ilex wood above it or the steep terraces of the podere, partly cultivated with plots of wheat or of fragrant beans, partly abandoned to high grass and to the untended bushes of the tangled, half-wild little pink Tuscan roses...' Her eulogistic description encompasses 'the great stone blocks of the Etruscan wall' and 'the deep Etruscan well in the midst of the ilex wood'. Succumbing, like her nineteenth-century compatriots, to the lure of the ancient past, she claims the well was dark, dank and eerie enough on a winter evening to provoke 'apprehensions and intuitions' – 'not a dread of 'robbers' or even of any ghost from the past... but an older, more primitive fear – half pleasurable, wholly absorbing'.[718]

When restoring the villa Pinsent attempted to reveal its earliest, humanist, incarnation; Cutting refused, however, probably influenced by the baroque sensibility of Geoffrey Scott who was to become her second husband. In letters to the municipal authorities Pinsent reveals that he has found Michelozzo's original loggia columns beneath 'the heavy pillars we see today', and notes that he would have liked to restore the loggia to its original form, but the owner preferred the eighteenth-century style.'[719]

Beevor saw Cutting as 'a rich American from an 'Old New York' family straight out of a novel by Edith Wharton'.[720] Acton described her as a determined bluestocking: 'something of the Platonic Academy still lingered...' [721] Huxley thought her one of the 'brightest spots' among the city's intelligentia. A friend and frequent guest before his socialist principles rejected her privileged lifestyle, he later created a vicious portrait of her as the self-centred Lillian Aldwinkle in his justly forgotten *Those Barren Leaves.* Huxley's protagonist is an ambitious heiress whose two hundred and seventy thousand pound capital estate is built on the exploitation of others' labour and resources: 'at this very moment, men and women of every race and colour were doing their bit to supply

[718] Origo, *Images*, p. 116.
[719] Mazzini, p. 151.
[720] Beevor, p. 104
[721] Acton, *Villas*, p. 48.

Mrs. Aldwinkle with her income... People worked; Mrs. Aldwinkle led the higher life.'[722]

Somerset Maugham also depicted her in a cruel but perceptive short story 'Louise' in which a manipulative mother, unable to stop the marriage of her daughter - pointedly called Iris - expires on the wedding day. Nonetheless Cutting was much admired if not well loved, and she continued the villa's humanist traditions, entertaining such luminaries as Harold Nicholson who wrote part of his biography of Bryon on the loggia, unaware that his wife was about to embark on an affair with their host's husband. Cutting also changed the name of the villa. Though for several centuries it had been known by the names of its male owners – Villa Mozzi then Villa Spence – Cutting resisted any impulse to immortalize herself, choosing instead to stress the villa's Medici associations by resuming the earlier name of Villa Medici.[723]

In 1926, after the breakdown of her marriage to Scott, Cutting married the English literary critic Percy Lubbock. Soon after, she asked Aubrey Waterfield to find them a piece of land on the coast near his own castle at Aulla, on which to build a 'cottage'. Waterfield found them a wooded promontory on a rocky bay at Lerici, jutting into the Gulf of Spezia. In 1931 she commissioned Pinsent to design their 'cottage' - a palatial villa named Gli Scafari - with a loggia overlooking the sea, Carrara marble floors and silk clad walls. Though originally intended as a retreat from the Florentine summers, they withdrew increasingly from the English community of Florence to the privacy of Gli Scafari.[724]

When war was declared the Lubbocks hung on in Italy. Finally, in June 1940, less than a week before Italy joined on the axis side, they fled to Switzerland where Origo had secured them visas. Lubbock described how, on the evening before they left, Waterfield came over from Poggio Gherardo. They 'sat and talked among the Chinese

[722] Huxley, p. 60.
[723] The issue of names plagues contemporary garden historians; Nichols calls Le Balze, Villa Spence (Nichols p. 245.)
[724] Cutting's marriage to Scott caused a rift with the Berensons which sent Mary into a two year nervous breakdown, her marriage to Lubbock destroyed his long friendship Wharton.

birds' – the eighteenth-century painted wallpaper - before saying their good-byes, neither knowing who or what would survive the impending chaos.[725] Indeed, Sybil wasted away in Switzerland, and died in 1942.

Though the villa itself was not unduly damaged, Beevor reports that after the war O+rigo arrived in a Red Cross jeep to find 'bomb-disposal squads at work and one of the outbuildings on fire.' [726] At the end of the war Lubbock, unable to bring himself to move back to Florence, settled permanently Gli Scafari. In 1951 Pinsent wrote to Berenson stating 'Iris and Antonio have gone back to a state of uncertainty about whether to revive Villa Medici or not.'[727] Although it was probably more practical to maintain than La Foce, ultimately the latter had a greater emotional significance for Origo and she finally sold the Villa Medici to the Mazzini family who continue to inhabit it, maintaining the garden to a very high standard, opening it to visiting scholars.

[725] Beevor, p. 181.
[726] Ibid., p. 211
[727] CP to BB 25.03.51, I Tatti Archive.

XXII. Villa Capponi: A Baroque Jewel

Although Pinsent's work at the Villa Capponi was relatively small, his adjustments to the overall design demonstrate the elegance and subtlety of his approach. The villa had long been a favourite in the Anglo-Florentine community, indeed it is one of the best preserved gardens in Italy, partly because it has had few owners over the centuries and those – particularly the Anglo Florentine owners of the last century – were sensitive enough not to impose the passing whims of horticultural fashion on this baroque jewel [22]. The oldest part of the building, the tower, probably dates from the fourteenth century, suggesting that the villa began, like Bellosguardo nearby, as a fortified farmhouse beyond the city. Sited on a southern hillside overlooking the Arno Valley, its steep surrounding slopes are covered with vineyards and olive groves even today, reflecting that unique Tuscan combination of architectural refinement within an ordered agricultural setting, which Eberlein characterised as 'dignity and domestic repose'.[728]

In 1572 Gino di Lodovico Capponi purchased the property, which, a century earlier had belonged to Piero di Bartolomeo di Bonaccorsi. The Capponis were one of the most powerful families in Florence and the family crest still adorns the garden façade of the villa. It is likely that Lodovico Capponi began creating the pleasure gardens, transforming any existing herb or vegetable patches behind the dwelling into a long bowling green. Wharton linked this 'fine oblong of old turf' with the bowling green at the Villa Gamberaia – another Capponi property, believing it was the only surviving remnant of the original garden [37].[729] Though probably inspired by Alberti's conviction that every garden should have an area for games, Wharton points out that such greenswards, 'set like jewels in clipped hedges or statue-crowned walls', prove that the early Italian gardener did appreciate the aesthetic value of turf even though large swathes of grass are unsuited to the Italian climate.[730] It was probably in the

[728] Eberlein, p. 297.
[729] Wharton, p. 48.
[730] Ibid., p. 46

nineteenth century, under its English owners, that the bowling-green was transformed into a lawn which Acton extolled as one of the best in Florence, 'a true *tapis vert*'.[731]

A walled garden to the east and a lower walled garden to the west were probably created during the seventeenth century as their intricate, symmetrical beds and elaborate enclosing walls suggest the baroque style.[732] The east garden is accessed from the lawn through pillars supporting terra-cotta griffins [22]; along the wall on each side the space is further guarded by a of pair terra-cotta lions bearing coats of arms. This garden is divided into neat square and diamond parterres flanked by gravel paths. A dipping pool against the back wall allows for easy watering and the high enclosing walls, of the same golden hue as the villa, are topped with elegant pedestals topped with terracotta urns. To the north, the triangular space behind is filled with ilex and cypress trees, remnants of the earlier wilderness demolished to create the formal garden.[733]

At the opposite end of the lawn is the west garden. This intriguing *giardino segreto* was built into the slope of the hill one storey below the villa but surrounded by the same baroque walls. A large, grilled window in the south wall offers spectacular views over olive groves to the city below [96]. This unusual feature reinforces the idea of the space an outdoor room, and indeed, until the twentieth century, it could only be entered from the house, via an underground passage through the cellars. Despite the fact that Thomas Church in America and John Brookes in England are often credited with inventing the idea of the garden as an 'outdoor room' this space demonstrates that the approach was, in fact fundamental to the classical Italian style.

The villa remained in the Capponi family for three centuries being gradually enlarged and embellished as new rooms grew from the tower to form three sides of a central courtyard with a curtain wall enclosing the fourth, separating the dwelling from the

---

[731] Acton, p. 143.
[732] Attlee, p. 157.
[733] Possana, p. 46, suggests that the eastern walled garden was created by Ferdinando Carlo Capponi in 1774; Hobhouse p. 70, claims the garden was in place by the mid-eighteenth-century, while Attlee suggests it was built in the seventeenth century; this seems most likely as it is distinctly baroque space, with ornate walls and intricate, formal, symmetrical beds.

garden beyond. The layout of the villa demonstrates how staff and master lived together through the centuries; the chapel, stable and servants' quarters being clustered in the east while the family rooms - adjoining the *cortile* or courtyard which provided light and fresh air – are gathered in the west, with a central hall, leading directly from the street to the garden, separating the two spheres.[734] Despite its luxurious gardens, the villa presents an austere façade to the public, being built up against the steep, narrow road, onto which the chapel, stable and entrance doors open directly.

In 1882 Lady Scott of Ancrum, daughter of the Duke of Portland and grandmother to the late Queen Mother, purchased the villa, bringing it into the Anglo-Florentine community, where it would remain for nearly a century. In 1905 Latham described it as 'one of the most charming English homes to be found upon the Tuscan hills,' adding that its garden, 'though small, is planned to the greatest advantage, and is a dream of beauty in the spring-time.'[735] A discrete character who does not feature in the Anglo-Florentine gossip, Scott was one of the first of the expatriates to respect Italian horticultural tradition; happily her lead was followed by the subsequent owners. When Temple Leader was creating his Gothic fantasies at Vincigliata and Graham was stuffing her Italian garden with English flowers, Scott demonstrated a degree of sympathy uncharacteristic of her compatriots, seamlessly slipping her English additions into the fabric of the villa.

Keen to possess that most Victorian horticultural feature, a rose garden, Scott carved a second walled enclosure lower down the western slope, accessed by a stone staircase from the *giardino segreto* above. This space was embellished with a central oval fountain, gravel paths and circular topiary while a great yew hedge sheltered three stone benches, sited to enjoy the scent which must have been intoxicating in the sun-warmed confines of the tall enclosing walls. The rose garden echoed the rest of the villa with

[734] Eberlein, p. 157.
[735] Latham, p. 126.

swirling baroque wall-tops which the youthful Jellicoe later described as 'so bubbling with fun that they chase away the cares of all who come'.[736]

It was probably also at this time that the underground passage from the house to the secret garden was turned into a rustic, tufa-lined grotto with a new stone staircase providing access from the lawn above. Scott is probably also responsible for the roses which cover the pillars of the wrought-iron gate at the back entrance to the villa. Framing the distant landscape of cypresses and olives, the pillars lead the eye from the ordered enclosure of garden and lawn to the openness of the fields beyond.

In between restoring her villa, expanding her garden and hosting such illustrious visitors as Gertrude Jekyll and Queen Victoria, Scott added the two loggias – one to the south, garden side [**96**] and one to the west side of the house with a large stone terrace in front of it. Both loggias have an antique air because, like Temple Leader, Scott was quick to salvage the columns from Florence's medieval market which was demolished in the late nineteenth century, to make room for the Piazza della Repubblica.[737]

Linked, as it was, with both the English aristocracy and the Renaissance nobility, the Villa Capponi was bound to appeal to cosmopolitan Americans, and in 1928 the curator of paintings at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Henry Clifford bought the property from the Price family of England which had acquired it after Scott's death.[738]

The villa was just one of several properties the Cliffords owned and though they kept it until 1978, visiting regularly, they never stayed long enough to integrate with the expatriate community.[739] In 1928 the Cliffords hired Pinsent to modernize the villa and

---

[736] Jellicoe, p. 37.
[737] Acton, *Villas*, p. 276.
[738] Inside the villa the Cliffords transformed the servant's hall into a grand library with a bookcase designed by Cecil Pinsent. It is likely that at the same time the cortile was covered with a glass roof to increase the size of the hall and provide more warmth in winter while still letting light into the house.
[739] Information from Clifford's godson, Hugh Freemantle, in conversation, July 2005.

modify the garden. It is likely they met Pinsent through the Berensons, with whom they were friendly, until a falling out occurred based 'on some silly gossip'.[740]

Charged with inserting a swimming pool into the baroque design, Pinsent created a new garden room below Scott's rose terrace, carving a space from the fields beyond the formal villa grounds. Playing on the theme of secret gardens and enclosed spaces, he shielded the pool with a tight cordon of high cypress hedges, interspersed, on the inside, with stone sculptures and marble benches [97]. Though the idea of using hedges to disguise the modern intrusion of swimming pools was not new – Percy Cane having used it through the 1930s in such suburban gardens as Bowhill, near Chichester, or 21 Addison Road Kensington; nonetheless Pinsent had the brilliant idea of adding water-spitting dolphins at either end to transform the utilitarian swimming pool into a large, elegant fountain.[741]

While providing privacy and shielding the modern pool from the ancient garden, Pinsent's design also recalls the gymnasia of ancient Rome which provided athletes with swimming canals lined by inspirational sculptures. Pinsent also created a garden circuit, incorporating the country track which passes the pool garden, skirts the terraced lawn in front of the house and leads past the lemon houses at the eastern boundary. In a style he would perfect at La Foce, Pinsent planted the path with a line of cypresses along the villa side, and a line of lilacs, under-planted with irises and anemones, along the abutting field, thus creating a harmonious link between formal gardens and rural countryside.

In 1978 the Cliffords sold the property to the Benedetti family, which continues to preserve its character as faithfully as their Anglo-Florentine predecessors while, similarly, inserting contemporary touches. When the roses succumbed to blight several years ago the rose garden was redesigned with wider, open gravel paths and the roses were replaced with circular parterres surrounding large pots of plumbago,

---

[740] Mariano, p. 280.
[741] Precise information on Percy Cane's work at Bowood and Addison Road comes from Charlotte Johnson's 1998 MA thesis for the AA, *Percy Cane, Garden Designer* – lent by the author, pp. 57, 75.

chrysanthemums and dahlias, reflected the modern fashion for low maintenance, colour and longevity in plants. Today the eastern enclosure is a lemon garden, with potted citrus trees at the centre of each box-edged parterre, enlivened with spring plantings of blue *myosotis* forget-me-not. Eberlein's plan of 1922 and Jellicoe's plan of 1923 both indicate that this garden was at the time a formal 'box pleasaunce' though Eberlein's notes a 'lemon house' at the end of the garden, suggesting that it may already have been deployed as a lemon garden.[742]

Though the gardens have been replanted over the centuries, the plan of the Villa Capponi remains essentially Renaissance, and while the estate ceased being a working farm in the nineteenth century, it still has seven hundred olive trees in the surrounding fields and preserves the rural atmosphere so cherished by the ancients.

[742] The plans indicate that between 1922 and 1923 the lemon garden was removed and the area was redesigned in a jazzy, modern pattern of diamonds and chevrons.

XXIII. A Modern Pastoral in an Ancient Landscape: Iris Origo's La Foce

La Foce is a fifteenth-century villa perched on a barren, exposed hillside; around this Iris Origo created a series of elegant, ordered, enclosing rooms which tame the hostile setting and integrate the house and garden into the wider landscape. La Foce is the last, and in many ways the best, of the Anglo-Florentine gardens so it is worth examining this final garden in detail. A true villa in the classical sense, it was part of a wider agricultural enterprise. Created by an Anglo-American married to an Italian, it engaged with the land and the people of Tuscany in a way that few Anglo-Florentine villas had done; it also adapted better than most to changing economic and social conditions which spelled the end of the Anglo-Florentine community.

The garden at La Foce was a happy collaboration between Iris Origo and Cecil Pinsent. It was one of Pinsent's two favourite projects, bracketing his career with his other favourite, I Tatti.[743] Where I Tatti is a student exercise, a self-conscious study in Renaissance design, La Foce is the work of a master: neither reconstruction nor pastiche it is a modern garden in the Renaissance style. While alluding to the past it also reflects the present and points to the future with its unique blend of classical composition, Tuscan vernacular materials and Modernist simplicity.

In Pinsent, Origo had an ideal collaborator; despite an eighteen year age gap they had been friends since he designed her mother's garden at Villa Medici, Fiesole a decade before. Their intimate acquaintance enabled Pinsent and Origo to work together in the classic gender partnership coined by Lutyens and Jekyll: he provided the architectural structure which she clothed in colour, scent and texture.

---

[743] In a letter, written from London to Berenson in Italy, dated 1945, Pinsent claims 'I am dead tired of Italy, but am irresistibly attracted to it, if only to one or two focal points, yourself and Iris chiefly, for I Tatti and La Foce were the scenes of my most poignant experiences, and have endured through all these fearsome distances.'(I Tatti archives, Quoted: Ethne Clarke, Cecil Pinsent: a Biography, *Cecil Pinsent & His Gardens In Tuscany*, p. 25.

Origo was an unusual woman; she lived through extraordinary times and responded to them with immense imagination, courage and compassion. Born in 1902 the only child of an American father and an English mother, Origo had a cosmopolitan childhood travelling between her American grandparents in Long Island, her British grandparents in Kilkenny and the London home where her father acted as secretary to the American Ambassador. Though he died of tuberculosis when she was eight, Origo's father had expressed the wish that she should be raised abroad: 'somewhere where she does not belong'. Intuiting, perhaps, that nationalism would be scourge of the twentieth century, he wanted to ensure his daughter would be free of the prejudice of patriotism. Following her husband's wish, Cutting, settled in the fifteenth-century Villa Medici, Fiesole.

Since his other dying wish was that his daughter should be educated at home Origo spent her childhood alone or in the company of her mother's hyper-intellectual friends. When Pinsent came to design the garden he proved a godsend to the lonely nine-year-old. On his death in 1963, Origo wrote to his family: 'he was, I think, my oldest friend; all the memories of childhood are mingled with his.'[744] In the early days he would accompany Origo and her mother on holiday as they retreated from the summer heat of Florence to a series of sea-side villas. One particular occasion is captured in a cartoon Pinsent drew of three etiolated figures: long haired Iris, chicly coiffed Sybil and balding Pinsent shivering between glowering sky and roiling sea.[745]

In *Those Barren Leaves,* Huxley portrays Origo as Irene, the naïve niece of the blue-stocking Lilian Aldwinkle. Huxley's Irene is a frivolous, practical person smothered by her guardian's attempts to transform her into a soulful artist.[746] At the time the book was being written, Origo was rebelling against the insular Anglo-Florentine community which Huxley lampooned. Indeed, she finally chose a more authentic Italian existence than any of her compatriots when, in 1924, she married a handsome, illegitimate, Catholic aristocrat, the Marchese Antonio Origo. He was impoverished, worldly and

[744] Fantoni, *Cecil Pinsent's Gardens in Tuscany*, p. 22.
[745] Ibid., p. 32.
[746] Huxley, p. 58.

ten years older; the situation was worthy of a Henry James novel and Origo's family, understandably, was distressed. Berenson trekked down the hill from I Tatti to advise her to keep her American citizenship while Mary Berenson confided to her diary: 'there is a sort of feeling abroad that she cannot be long happy with that anti-intellectual young man'.[747] Having failed to prevent the marriage, Cutting, took to her sick bed, absenting herself from the wedding.

As predicted, the union was often strained, not least by his infidelities, her infidelities, the death, in childhood, of their beloved son and the political situation which left them on opposite sides in the Second World War. Nonetheless the marriage survived and within it the Origos both lived creative and productive lives; spurred, perhaps, by the example of her indolent, hypochondriacal mother, Origo determined to do something useful with her life. Following so soon after the devastation of the First World War, with its mustard gas, barbed wire and trench warfare, it is hardly surprising that the idealistic couple decided to devote themselves to repairing the land. Having determined on a future in farming Origo explains: 'we were looking for a place with enough to fill our lifetime, but we hoped that it might be in a setting of some beauty. Privately I thought that we might perhaps find one of the fourteenth or fifteenth-century villas which were then almost as much a part of the Tuscan landscape as the hills on which they stood or the long cypress avenues which led up to them...'[748]

On discovering that most of the available properties around Florence were already 'neat and fruitful', having been cultivated since the days of the *Decameron*, the Origos looked further afield. In the Val d'Orcia, a depopulated area in southern Tuscany, they came upon the 3,500 acre estate of La Foce.[749] A bleak desert of barren clay hills rising from a parched valley [98], the estate had been mismanaged for centuries; only a fraction of the land was good, only a fraction of that was cultivated, the forests were neglected and the twenty-five outlying farms were in varying states of disrepair [99]. Some were virtually inaccessible, most contained several dozen inhabitants crammed

[747] Moorehead, p. 83.
[748] Origo, *Images*, p. 199.
[749] Ibid., p. 199.

into a few dark, airless rooms. To the south stood the black, basalt cliffs and the towering fortress of Radicofani, to the west was the summit of Monte Amiata, an extinct volcano which blocked the sea breezes while funnelling in the bitter *tramontana* wind from the north and the hot, dry *scirocco* from the south.

Despite this unpromising prospect, the Origos were enchanted: 'We only knew at once that this vast, lonely, uncompromising landscape fascinated and compelled us. To live in the shadow of that mysterious mountain, to arrest the erosion of those steep ridges, to turn this bare clay into wheat-fields, to rebuild these farms and see prosperity return to the woods – that, we were sure, was the life we wanted.'[750]

The estate had not always been barren, and Origo, a romantic as well as a budding historian, was as seduced by the region's past as by its potential future.[751] She proudly recounts how the valley had been colonized by the Etruscans by the fifth century BC, how local chestnut woods had supplied timber for the Roman galleys in the second Punic wars, and how, as part of the famous *Via Francigena* - the medieval pilgrim route to Rome, the local roads had been linked to the whole of Christian Europe.[752] In fact, her own villa had been built at the end of the fifteenth century as a hostel for those very pilgrims.

In his *The Mystical Marriage of Saint Francis with the Virtues* the fourteenth-century Sienese painter Stefano di Giovanni Sassetta, depicts the Val d'Orcia as a verdant patchwork of tilled fields and shaded slopes [**100**]. A similar image emerges from the pen of Pope Pius II (1458-64) who retreated here from the heat of Rome a hundred miles to the south. Pius described verdant valleys, foothills dotted with oak and cork trees, and the summit of Monte Amiata cloaked in chestnut groves and beech woods:

---

[750] Ibid., p. 201.

[751] Like many Anglo-Florentines, Origo became a writer, publishing nine books, including *The Merchant of Prato* - still the best study of medieval Italian mercantile life, and a biography of Saint Bernardino of Siena, the fifteenth century Franciscan whose contribution to theology was a defence of the entrepreneur– a thesis which must have heartened Origo during the worst of the communist-inspired class struggles that followed.

[752] Origo, *Images*, p. 200.

'the ground is covered with fragrant herbs and wild strawberries, and among them small streams of clear water whisper their eternal song.'[753]

This rural idyll was destroyed in the sixteenth century during the protracted wars between Siena and Florence, the former supported by the Ghibellines and the Emperor Charles V, the latter, by Guelphs and the Popes. When the region was finally granted to Cosimo de Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, the turmoil had destroyed villages and devastated the land, as peasants fled to the cities, leaving fields untilled, forests unmanaged and slopes eroding to their dry, clay base. When the Origos arrived, four centuries later, the only hint of former glory was the ruined battlements, towers and churches littering the hilltops.

It is hard to imagine what would induce a shy, conscientious Englishwoman to leave the domesticity of Florence and settle in this bleak landscape three and a half hours journey from family and friends. In her autobiography Origo admits to having felt out of place amid the aimless, affluent expatriates. Perhaps it was this sense of drifting, compounded by her mixed heritage and her cosmopolitan upbringing, which drove her to put down roots in such alien soil.'[754]

As a writer, Origo was fascinated by the peasants, noting their customs and superstitions, charting their lives in meticulous detail. In the early days the harvest was done by hand with long rows of reapers, binders and gleaners, 'bending low in a gesture as old as Ruth's'.[755] Unusually, however, Origo could see beyond the quaint scenes to empathize with the hardship involved in such a primitive lifestyle; after depicting in sensuous detail the stone olive-press with men naked to the waist, glistening with sweat, working through the night by oil lamp, she notes, 'Now, in a white tiled room, electric presses do the work in one tenth of the time. One can hardly deplore the change, yet it

---

[753] Origo, *La Foce*, p. 5.
[754] She longed for the gentle Florentine landscapes of her childhood: 'I felt the landscape around me to be alien, inhuman –built on a scale fit for demi-gods and giants, but not for us. Origo, *Images*, p. 211.
[755] Ibid., p. 205.

is perhaps at least worthwhile to record it.'[756] And record it she did, depicting the disappearing rural lifestyle in several autobiographies, celebrating the country's past in studies of the eighteenth-century poet Giacomo Leopardi, the fourteenth century Reinzi an innkeeper's son who was crowned Tribune of Rome, the medieval Saint Bernardino, Shelley's daughter Allegra, Byron's lover Countess Guiccioli and the medieval merchant, Francesco Datini.

While writing provided intellectual stimulation however, it is clear from Origo's letters and diary that La Foce was her passion. Over the decades the Origos transformed the estate from a lunar landscape to a fertile valley, creating forests, wheat fields, olive groves, vineyards, reservoirs and picturesque farms with attendant livestock, including the great, grey, *maremmano* oxen, introduced by Attila from the Hungarian steppes to plough the heavy Italian soil [**46**].

While Origo concerned herself primarily with the garden, they operated as a team. Having purchased the estate with all of their combined capital they were dependent, for running costs, on her five-thousand-dollars a year income.[757] Unlike many land-owners the Origos were intimately involved in the estate. They were the first proprietors in a over a century to live at La Foce, the previous owners preferring to reside in Chianciano, the local spa town whose hot springs were fed by the underground fissures of the extinct Monte Amiata. In the early years all their money, including the annual Christmas cheque from Origo's American grandmother, went towards improving the land and the lives of the tenant farmers. Supplanting superstition with science they set out to create a model farm despite the scepticism of neighbouring landowners and the even greater resistance of their own tenants to new ideas.[758]

---

[756] Ibid., p. 207.
[757] Caroline Moorehead, *Iris Origo, Marchesa of Val d'Orcia*, John Murray, London, 2000, p 87.
[758] Not all their experiments were successful; an attempt to improve their wool by cross-breeding local flocks with Angus sheep, imported at great expense from Scotland, failed when the new stock was decimated by tick fever.

In 1913 Lucas described how the government, keen to wean peasant farmers from their primitive traditions, sent inspectors to advise on pruning, viniculture and artificial fertilizers.[759] When he came to power in 1922 Mussolini continued this tradition. In an effort to foster rural development, the Fascist government provided funds towards land drainage, road building, reforestation and the purchase of seed and fertilizers. To combat rural depopulation, it also helped improve the lot of peasant farmers, and at La Foce it jointly financed an eight-bed clinic, a primary school and a kindergarten, for which Origo provided the novel luxury of horse-drawn carriage to transport the youngest children from the most remote farms.[760] In her autobiography Origo distances herself from the Fascist's 'cult of rhetoric and violence', stressing her own isolation and ignorance; but any large estate had to make accommodations with the government, and the Fascist policy of land improvement can only be applauded even if many of its other policies were deplorable.[761] By 1934 the Origos had doubled the acreage of the estate and increased the number of farms from twenty-five to fifty-seven.[762]

From the beginning Pinsent was involved in the restoration and expansion of La Foce; the harmony of the overall design owes as much to his intimate knowledge of the Origos as to his architectural skills. Though originally Iris' friend, Pinsent soon became a friend of Antonio whose practicality and energy impressed the fey architect. As Pinsent remained a life-long bachelor he was easily absorbed into the family; after Scott, married Cutting, Pinsent would join the Origos at the Villa Medici for Christmas; in the early years of their marriage he travelled with them on several occasions, and while designing for La Foce he would stay as a guest at the villa for months at a time.[763]

La Foce means 'the meeting point' as the fifteenth-century hostel was built at the intersection of the valley's main roads. Though hardly the elegant villa Origo had envisioned, over the years the pilgrim hostel had been transformed into a sturdy country house [19]. Sometimes, rather fancifully, attributed to Baldassare Peruzzi, the handsome

[759] Lucas, p. 198.
[760] Origo, *La Foce*, p. 32.
[761] Origo, *Images*, p. 7.
[762] Origo, *La Foce*, p. 29.
[763] Ibid., p. 59.

ground floor loggia with its three elegant arches suggest the Sienese architect's classical approach, his use of regional brick and his delight in perspective.[764] The floor above, originally a second loggia, had been closed in during the nineteenth century to make more internal space.[765]

Pinsent's first task, after making the house habitable, was to redesign the entrance[101]. The public road, which had passed right beside the front façade, was diverted to create an elegant forecourt. This was screened from the new road with tall stone walls and an imposing wrought-iron gate, whose double piers frame the villa. Though the drive from the gates to the villa is short, it was planted with cypresses in the Tuscan style. While lending an imprimatur of age, these also fulfilled Origo's desire for a cypress avenue.[766]

From 1931-35 Pinsent extended the *fattoria* to create an enclosed courtyard to the side of the villa, with loose arrangement of buildings beyond, incorporating garage, clinic and schools. Using the Tuscan style he'd honed over the past quarter century Pinsent designed a sequence of open spaces and enclosing buildings in the low, heavy, regional style. While the main forecourt abutting the villa had to be kept open to receive the farm carts, Pinsent raised this utilitarian space by ensuring that the large tank used for washing laundry and watering livestock, resembled a decorative grotto.[767] Unlike grander villas such as Acton's La Pietra, La Foce had evolved with the farm buildings still attached to the main dwelling. Even after the necessity for protection had passed, Tuscan villas often kept the subsidiary buildings clustered round the villa to enable the landlord to oversee his staff as well as to facilitate movement between the buildings in

---

[764] Though neither Origo nor her daughter mention Peruzzi; John Dixon Hunt, claims there is a general consensus that Peruzzi built the villa as one of many he did in the region where he retreated after the sack of Rome in 1527. As the house is said to have been built in 1498, while Peruzzi was still in Rome, this seems wishful thinking. *La Foce*, 283 and fn 17, p. 295.

[765] A peculiar decision since the resulting room had no natural light; Pinsent improved it by inserting a skylight and frescoing the walls with landscape scenes to create a formal dining room.

[766] In defiance of the Italian custom which claims trees are unhealthy close to a house, two ilex trees were planted to frame the front loggia. Though contained in tightly clipped mushroom shapes, today they provide a dense imposing presence, suggesting that perhaps the Italians are right.

[767] Today main entrance to the villa is through the fattoria; this informal approach has none of the dignity of the original, though the former farm buildings, now offices and holiday rentals, are screened with decorative plants and the forecourt is adorned with a fountain.

unpleasant weather. Unusually, the Origos remained faithful to this early style; allowing the architecture to express physically the psychological interdependence of landlord and tenant.

In her autobiography Origo describes the bustle of the *fattoria* with the daily gathering for school, the twice-weekly queue at the clinic, the constant round of complaints and requests interspersed with seasonal rituals: the vintage when grapes would be left to ferment in great open vats; the oil-pressing when the olives would be shovelled from ox-carts to the huge millstone turned by a blind-folded donkey; the religious rites with pagan origins when the local priest processed through the fields with his crucifix followed by the congregation chanting litanies for fertility. The *fattoria* was heart of the community's social life as well as its business centre and the formal lawn by the main gate was used for harvest festivals, christenings and weddings. Amid all this public life, Origo needed a place of her own.

There was no garden at La Foce when the Origos arrived, just a few straggly palms and the remains of a *giardino inglese* which had probably been planted in the nineteenth century for ease of maintenance.[768] In the early days water was scarce; the well barely provided enough drinking water and any excess went immediately to the farm. Soon after moving in, however, Origo began creating a small garden at the back of the villa, the furthest point from the busy *fattoria* courtyard. This was her private space, her bulwark against the vast, inhuman landscape. She later recalled how, on first viewing the property, she was overcome by a longing for 'the gentle, trim Florentine landscape of my childhood or for green English fields and big trees – and most of all for a pretty house and garden to come home to in the evening'.[769] It is this that Pinsent helped her create.

In 1923 Origo wrote to a former suitor, Colin Mackenzie, explaining her vision of her future: 'the soil I believe to be that of the Promised Land, but it has been terribly

[768] Moorehead, p. 87.
[769] Origo, *Images*, p. 211.

neglected, so there will be a good deal for Antonio to do – and I shall 'visit the poor', run the school, play the piano, I hope to write – not a bad life, Colin!'[770] In a letter dated March 1925 she tells him: 'I am very busy planning a nursery [she was expecting her first child] and a garden for the summer'; she goes on to announce the discovery of a perfect gardener: 'although he can't make flowers spring out of a dust heap with the rapidity I should like...'[771] From the wilds of Scotland, Mackenzie followed the garden's progress, sending plants, seeds and advice. By December, Origo's letters reveal that despite the obligations of new motherhood, she is already engaged in the physical work of the garden; thanking him for some rose bushes, she confesses: 'I have been digging ditches in the garden all day and just before dark had the satisfaction of seeing the last one in its place.'[772]

As her husband was preoccupied with the estate it is likely that the garden, the focus of her energies and a major subject of their epistolary relationship, was a *giardino segreto* Origo shared with her distant companion. In August 1926 she writes: 'You will find the garden in the same deplorable state as it was twelve months ago'. Three months later she announces that the fountain is in place and she is going to pave the paths with travertine 'so that we should have at least one refuge on muddy days.'[773] While a fountain might seem an extraordinary luxury amid such water deprivation, since the middle ages water had been an essential feature of even the smallest Italian garden, animating the still, enclosed space of the *hortus conclusus* with its gay sparkle and humidifying the air with its cooling splash. Origo's little fountain on its dolphin base is probably French and undoubtedly antique, though Pinsent designed the oval basin into which it fell **[102]**.

However pleasing its visual, aural and humidifying effects, the fountain's trickle must have been discrete and sporadic until 1927 when Origo's American grandmother, shocked to discover the privations she was living under, provided the funds to draw

[770] Moorehead, p. 83.
[771] Origo, *La Foce*, 34.
[772] Ibid., p. 34.
[773] Ibid., p. 34.

water from a stream six miles away. After adding new lavatories to the house, Origo expanded her horticultural palette now that the fear of drought was assuaged. Over the next three years she commissioned Pinsent to design a stone-piered loggia to flank the two sides of the garden abutting the house; this she draped in purple wisteria and the yellow *Banksia* roses. The third side, backed by the wall which buttresses the ascending slope, contains an ingenious laurel-dome which makes a cooling enclosure, furnished with a stone bench and table designed by Pinsent for the site.[774] Pinsent also designed tall stone pillars ornamented with urns to frame the view of Monte Amiata on the fourth side of the space. Within the garden he designed box parterres in the corners of the lawn which Origo filled, English-style, with flowers rather than the traditional Italian gravel or herbs.

With its steep site, buttressing wall and simple layout this space, known variously as the Italian or the Fountain garden, is reminiscent of the Renaissance-style parterres Pinsent created for Origo's mother ten years before. La Foce, like Villa Medici deviates from the Renaissance ideal, being sited, not at the crest of a hill, but halfway down the slope, with its main entrance perpendicular to the view. Choosing to work with the topography rather than refocus the villa or undertake major landscaping, Origo and Pinsent carved the garden from the slope so it rises up the hill to the side and descends to the front. The stone used throughout comes from the local quarry near Siena, thus linking the cultivated sphere of the garden to the wider countryside. Though Renaissance tradition demands sharp lines and clear detail, Origo favoured this rough travertine whose pitted surface retained earth and moisture, encouraging the growth of campanula, aubretia and alyssum to soften the hard landscaping.

With its architectural enclosures and exuberant planting La Foce suggests the style which Vita Sackville-West developed at Sissinghurst. Intriguingly however, Sackville-West didn't evolve her distinctive style until after the Second World War while La Foce's gardens were complete by 1939. It is not fanciful to suggest that the doyenne of

[774] The dates here and throughout are from a chronology of Pinsent's work at La Foce, appendixed to Benedetta Origo's memoir in *La Foce*, p. 51.

the English style might have been influenced by La Foce. Sackville-West - who was once memorably described as 'Lady Chatterley and her lover in one'- stayed at the Villa Medici in 1924. Drawn by their shared love of literature, she embarked on an affair with her host's husband Geoffrey Scott. The only man with whom she ever had an extra-marital affair, Scott visited her in England over the next few years and may well have discussed the horticultural ideas which his friends Pinsent and Origo were then exploring. While Sackville-West does not appear to have visited La Foce, Origo met her in London in 1927 during a 'curiously conceived' luncheon given by Sybil Colefax; the two women talked for some time and may well have discussed gardening. [775]

After completing the fountain garden in 1930, it was three years before Pinsent would work again with Origo, a hiatus caused, in part, because Origo's husband made Pinsent unwelcome after the chauffeur claimed that Origo was cavorting with 'the engineer'. [776] Though she was, at the time, having an affair with Colin Mackenzie, the accusation was not unfounded; many years later, when asked if she and Pinsent had been in love, she replied, 'Yes. I was and he was. But not at the same time.'[777] When Pinsent died Origo wrote to his family, 'he was, I think, my oldest friend; all the memories of childhood are mingled with his'.[778] While Origo had various lovers throughout her life, she might well have been the love of Pinsent's life: apart from a brief suggestion of an affair with the Houghton's daughter, the gossipy annals of the community make no comment on his emotional engagements yet he remained in contact with Origo throughout his life. His temporary banishment from La Foce was awkward, however, not least because he was restructuring the fattoria, but evidently he managed to design from afar as the work on the farm continued.

By 1933 the suspicion had passed and Pinsent was back in the garden where Origo commissioned him to push further into the landscape creating a lemon garden beyond her Italian Garden. More traditionally Italian than the fountain garden, this new space

---

[775] Moorehead, p. 109.
[776] Ibid., p. 130.
[777] Ibid., p. 118.
[778] Ethne Clark, *Cecil Pinsent's Gardens in Tuscany*, p. 22.

contained a series of box hedged enclosures, filled with potted lemon trees on marble plinths. To protect the trees through the bitter winters Pinsent designed an elegant baroque *limonaia*, beside the main entrance gate where it provided a backdrop for the festivities on the front lawn [103].[779]

Facing the *limonaia*, to the left of the villa's main entrance, a box hedge encloses a bronze sculpture of a mounted herdsman driving a herd of buffalo. Though rather out of keeping with the classical lines of the rest of villa, this pastoral scene was sculpted by Antonio's father, Marchese Clemente Origo, a cavalry officer, who, having run off with the married mother of his illegitimate son, retreated to the obscurity of Florence where he painted and sculpted to minor acclaim.

In true English fashion, Origo smothered the walls of her lemon garden with roses, honeysuckle and jasmine while planting the edges with beds of peonies and lilies, both of which thrive in the heavy, clay soil. This space was enclosed at the far end with a balustraded terrace overlooking the valley. Despite the Italian preference for eating indoors, Origo convinced her husband to dine here on summer evenings. Her daughter describes how Origo and her husband would stroll through the gardens, talking over the events of the day and watching the sunset from the terrace. The garden was one sphere Origo could share with her 'anti-intellectual' husband; indeed she once stressed to her daughter: 'It is the fattoria and the land that make this house and garden possible. Taken by themselves, they would have no sense at all.'[780]

At this time Pinsent was also commissioned to design a rose garden, turning the buttressed slope above the villa into a long, narrow terrace of stone-lined, geometric rose beds. The most English area of the whole estate, the rose garden is defined by herbaceous beds along one side and a lavender border on the other. Here Origo experimented with cottage favourites. Having failed with lupins, phlox and

---

[779] Though such vulgar features were anathema to Antonio Origo, after his death part of this lawn was sacrificed to create the swimming pool which remains today.
[780] Origo, *La Foce*, p. 38.

delphiniums, she was relieved to discover that imported English hollyhocks thrive in the hot Tuscan summers, and the descendants of her first imports flourish there today.

On the outer edge, the Rose Garden is flanked by a magnificent wisteria-covered pergola which follows the curve of the hill, disappearing round the corner [**104**]. As travertine acts as the unifying element in the architecture of the garden, wisteria serves as the unifying element in the planting. A wisteria-covered cellar in the forecourt links the public realm of the fattoria to the private realm of the gardens behind. The wisteria arbour abutting the house links villa to garden, while the wisteria pergola links the formal gardens to the woodland beyond, ending in a semi-circular cypress hedge which encloses a bench overlooking the valley. The stone path continues round the slope, giving way to a grassy path which runs beneath a rustic, vine-covered pergola into the woods.

In 1933 when their eight-year-old son, Gianni, died of meningitis, Origo nearly abandoned the estate and the marriage: 'every inch of the house and garden, every field and tree, seemed full of his presence – I felt that I could not bear to come back.'[781] As with many before her however, she found solace in her garden. Binding herself permanently to the land and the region, she asked Pinsent to design a family chapel and cemetery in which to lay her beloved son. Though accessible from the main road, the cemetery is an integral part of La Foce. Linked to the villa by the grass path, it is the focus of the woodland garden which Origo created in her grief. Combining wild herbs, flowering shrubs and ornamental trees she developed a fragrant wilderness of consoling beauty.

The cemetery itself is set into the hillside where it merges with the wider landscape. A stark, rectangular stone chapel presides from the highest point, its sepulchral form relieved by a simple Palladian porch. The terraced cemetery has family plots on the uppermost level, with the lower levels, in death as in life, reserved for staff and tenants [**105**]. Across the road a massive oak tree balances the chapel. Blending discretely

[781] Origo, *Images*, p. 254.

with the surrounding woods it is virtually invisible until visitors, emerging from the chapel, suddenly discover its comforting form framed by the entrance gates. It is typical of Pinsent to have conceived a composition which presents this subtle but eloquent message of resurrection and continuity.[782]

Through the 1930s Fascism had been slowly infiltrating Italian life, imposing discipline on the people while promoting efficiency in industry, commerce and agriculture. Mussolini's wilder policies were a subject of mild amusement, nonetheless by forbidding the unhygienic handshake in favour of the cleaner Roman salute, promoting exercise and insisting women wear feminine clothes, Mussolini's attempt to shape the Italian people did, in fact, echo Hitler's policies in Germany. These oppressive measures, however, had little impact in rural areas; even Mussolini's suppression of the press and rigging of elections went largely unnoticed as newspapers were scarce and elections were often ignored. Further, the Fascists worked in harmony with landowners - an association which lent the government legitimacy while providing landowners with support in their efforts to modernise their estates. In any case, Origo was so integrated with the local community that she could pass as a native, and thus was spared the petty acts of xenophobia which alerted other expatriates to the growing antagonism towards the affluent nations of the west.

Even after Italy's ill advised invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, her support for Franco's Nationalists in Spain, and her imposition of the anti-Semitic Race Manifesto of 1938, few acknowledged the sinister association between the Fascists and the Nazis. In 1939 when Britain entered the war, the English expatriates began retreating, though few believed that Mussolini would be so foolish as to join the fray. It was in this climate that the Lower Garden was created, perched on a deep terrace cut into the slope overhanging the valley. Accessed by an elegant double staircase from the balustrade of the Lemon Garden, this flowerless, scentless, evergreen space is the most austere of all

[782] In 1955, for an - ultimately unpublished - article by John Flemming for *Country Life*, Pinsent provided a list of six photographs which he wished to accompany the piece about his work; included among them was an image of this chapel. 'A Record of the Works of Cecil Pinsent in Tuscany', Georgio Galletti, in *Cecil Pinsent And His Gardens In Tuscany*, p 51.

La Foce's gardens, an effort, it seems, to create an image of Renaissance harmony in the face of contemporary unrest.

A semi-circle of cypresses across the end of the garden hides the road beneath while screening the vista to provide tantalizing glimpses of the spectacular view. Eight 'rooms' enclosed in double box hedges fill the wedge-shaped space, each of the larger four rooms containing a magnificent *magnolia grandiflora.* Though these glossy trees were not introduced from America till the eighteenth century, their conical forms echo the garden's Renaissance geometry multiplied by conical finials on the balustrades.

In the back of the double staircase Pinsent inserted a classical grotto with an elegant three-tiered fountain [**106**]; he also placed a simple stone pond at the end of the garden, backed by a curved stone bench. Facing into the garden, this bench echoes the rustic bench in the woodland above, facing out over the countryside. At the end of the lower garden a sculpture of a Caucasian carrying a sack of gardening tools, is paired with a sculpture of a Moor carrying a cornucopia, at the top of the tree-lined woodland path.[783] Contrasting the labour of the garden with the bounty of the wilderness, this subtle pairing underscores the philosophy of La Foce where a constant dialogue is played out between art and nature, as elements of the formal garden are echoed in the woodland beyond.[784]

Following the lines of ancient terracing Origo created a second, informal ascent rising through open meadow in a zigzag path which echoes the baroque double staircase in the formal garden below. Beyond this ascent the woodland garden merges with the ancient

[783]The Moor is reached by a stone staircase running perpendicular to the formal axis. Rising from the lemon garden, through the rose terrace, to a cypress-lined path, the steps change from stone to turf as they ascend. This straight cypress ascent echoes other grand staircases such as that at Cetinale, nearby; it also contrasts with the cypress-lined road which zigzags up the slope across the alley.

[784] The stone path turning to grass as it winds beyond the formal garden; the wisteria pergola within the garden echoed by the vine-covered pergola beyond; the sculpted stone staircase rising from the Lemon garden to become a set of simple grass steps as it rises through the woods; the two stone benches: one facing into the enclosed formality of the lower garden with a semi-circle of cypresses screening the void beyond, the other backed against the slope opening out to the valley.

forest into which she introduced tulips, anemone, daffodils and scillas to the existing carpet of crocuses, cyclamen, violets and colchicum.

One of the main features of La Foce is actually located on a slope across the valley where it makes a focal point in the view from the garden. Here, on a newly built road winding up to a distant farm, the Origos planted the long, zigzagging cypress avenue Iris envisioned decades before [107]. While providing shade and shelter from the bitter winds, the line of cypresses snaking up the hillside resembles a feature depicted in the landscape of Benozzo Gozzoli's fifteenth-century fresco at the Palazzo Medici in Florence. The tourists who have made this one of the most photographed views in Tuscany are generally unaware that the archetypical scene was created less than a century ago by designers fusing the picturesque with the practical.

In June 1940, soon after the lower garden was finished, Italy joined the war on the side of Nazi Germany. Pinsent returned to England to sign up with the allies. Torn by divided loyalties, Origo moved to Rome where, despite being an enemy alien, she was allowed to work for the Red Cross. Wartime in the city was a catalogue of scarcity; Origo recounts how a friend with six children sold twelve silver spoons to buy a ham while small restaurants were springing up daily, providing excellent meals at exorbitant prices for Fascist officials – she adds, 'It is generally expected that the harvest-fields will be destroyed by the Allies with incendiary bombs.'[785]

In 1942, pregnant with her second daughter, she returned, once again, to La Foce. Compared with the privations of city life, where food was scarce, fruit and vegetables practically non-existent and milk was rationed at less than a cupful per day, the estate offered relative luxury. Producing its own oil, wine, bread, meat, wood, wool, cheese and honey it supplied its inhabitants with both food and clothing. Origo recounts that they made their own soap with potato peelings, kitchen fat and soda, and when fuel was scarce they burned olive kernels. Soon, however even the blessed villa could not supply every want: in 1944 a third of their cattle, six hundred sheep, all their chickens and

[785] Iris Origo, *War in Val d'Orcia: An Italian War Diary, 1943-1944*, Jonathan Cape, 1947, p. 39.

turkeys were killed or confiscated first by retreating Germans then by Goums – Moroccan units serving with the French, depriving the estate of milk, meat and eggs. In a particularly malicious act retreating Germans also burned their beehives.[786]

Origo's diary of the war years, published as *War In Val d'Orcia*, is a poignant account of domestic boredom alternating with terrifying risk. Fighting took place in nearby fields while allies, deserters, Fascist soldiers and anti-Fascist partisans were all sheltered at various times and in various places about the estate. In 1943 the kindergarten housed twenty evacuee children; after the war Origo continued to support homeless, illegitimate, abandoned, tubercular, malnourished and convalescing children – all of whose numbers increased during wartime.[787]

Like many of Italy's grand gardens, La Foce suffered accidental and deliberate damage. It was shelled by the allies when the villa was commandeered by the Germans. By the end of the war the terraces were lined with machine gun trenches and pitted with shell holes, the lemon trees had been destroyed and the land was littered with mines laid by retreating Germans.

After the intimacy and co-operation of the war years, the post-war period was a heart-breaking time of industrialization and social agitation. Along with redundancies and strikes there was mass migration to the cities on a scale not seen since the Middle Ages.[788] Adapting to the changing conditions, the Origos reorganized the farm, making use of machinery and depending less on manual labour. By 1970, of the fifty-seven farms, only six were still inhabited by their original tenants. Though a few had been taken over by skilled men who could manage the modern machinery, most were simply abandoned as tenants opted for an easier life of factory-work or tourism the nearby

[786] Ibid., p. 11.
[787] Origo attempted to find foster or adoptive parents for the orphans in America till Italian laws forbade adoption of Italian children by foreigners. Those who didn't find homes were sent to boarding school and later were found apprenticeships, returning to La Foce for holidays where a nurse was employed to oversee them. Origo also founded a sanatorium in Florence for children suffering from tuberculosis.
[788] By 1970 only fifteen pupils attended La Foce's school which had once held ninety.

towns.[789] The gardens also had to adjust to post-war conditions; deep herbaceous borders, yards of hedges to be clipped and stonework to be maintained were extremely labour intensive. Annual plants were replaced by perennials, flowering shrubs bulked out the beds; irrigation systems were installed and hedge clipping was reduced to twice yearly. Clipping was abandoned in the roadside hedges which previously had been maintained to provide tenants with fruit and fuel.[790]

Like many of their countrymen the Origos considered selling in the 1950s when the Communist threat was at its height. Having looked for new farms in England and America, they finally decided to remain. In the 1970s the Red Brigade posed a new danger with several local kidnappings attributed to the Sardinian shepherds who had settled the valley's abandoned farms. After her husband's death in 1976 Origo's daughters attempted to sell the estate; when local workers unions objected, they divided the land, selling one third to a commune run by former estate workers. After several years of mismanagement the land was sold to the cooperative of Sardinian shepherds which still owns it today. European Community subsidies have ensured that the valley has not completely reverted to sheep grazing while the rise in rural tourism has allowed the abandoned farmhouses to be converted to holiday homes.

In 1988 Iris Origo died. Nine years later her daughter, Benedetta, began opening the gardens at La Foce. Three years after that, Caroline Moorehead's biography introduced the Marchesa to a new generation. Though a respected historian, Origo's real legacy is her garden. The primary focus of her creative and emotional energy, it was a refuge from the harsh surrounding countryside, from the bustle of the farm, from the social life of the city and from the tragedies of her life. It is also an autobiography in horticulture encoding the memory of the people she loved. As one of the few large gardens created in modern Italy, La Foce has immediate historical interest. A twentieth-century pastoral

[789] Origo, *Images*, p. 248.
[790] Origo, *La Foce*, p. 60.

in an ancient landscape, it combines the best of English and Italian traditions to create a unique, modern hybrid.[791]

[791] Harold Acton, surprisingly, ignores La Foce in *Tuscan Villas* though he praises the Marchesa's writing. La Foce is mentioned in the articles about Pinsent which marked the surge of interest in this architect in the 1990s. The garden has recently come to the attention of garden historians however through the publication, in 2001, of large, glossy book, *La Foce* - a curious quadripartite study which combines a memoir by Benedetta Origo, a hundred annotated photos by Morna Livingston, a set of sketches by landscape designer Laurie Olin and an essay by landscape historian John Dixon Hunt.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Manuscripts

Janet Ross Archive, (including Waterfield letters) British Institute, Florence

Cecil Pinsent Letters, I Tatti Archive, I Tatti, Settignano, Florence

John Temple Leader Archive, Villa Maiano, Maiano, Florence

Vernon Lee Archive, Il Palmerino, San Domenico, Florence

Charlotte Johnson, *Percy Cane, Garden Designer,* MA thesis, Architectural Association, London, 1998

Books

Acton, Harold, *Tuscan Villas*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1970

- *Memoirs of an Aesthete*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1984, first pub'd Methuen, 1948

Beevor, Kinta, *A Tuscan Childhood*, Viking, London, 1993

Berenson, Bernard, *Sunset and Twilight*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1964

Boccaccio, *Decameron*, tr. GH McWilliam, Penguin, London, 1972

Bolton, Arthur T. *The Gardens of Italy*, Country Life, London 1919

Burckhardt, Jacob, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 1860, repub'd Phaidon, London, 1945

Cartwright, Julia, *Italian Gardens Of The Renaissance*, Smith, Elder & Co, London, 1914

Ciacci, Margherita ed.: *Of Queens' Gardens: the Myth of Florence in the Pre-Raphaelite Milieu and in American Culture,* Sillabe, Livorno, 2004

Dami, Luigi, *The Italian Garden*, Brentano's, New York, 1924

Eberlein, Harold Donaldson, *Villas of Florence and Tuscany*, JB Lippincott, Philadelphia, 1922

Elgood, George, S, *Italian Gardens,* Longman, London, 1907

Forster, E.M. *A Room With A View*, Knopf, New York, 1922

Graham, Georgina, *In A Tuscan Garden*, 1902

Huxley, Aldous, *Those Barren Leaves*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1925, this ed. 1969

James, Henry, *Italian Hours*, Houghton, Boston,1909; repub'd. Grove, New York

Jellicoe, G.A. and Shepherd, J.C., *Italian Gardens of the Renaissance*, Academy Editions, London, 1986, first pub'd by Ernest Benn, London, 1925

Latham, Charles, *The Gardens of Italy*, Country Life, London, 1905

Le Blond, Mrs. Aubrey, *The Old Gardens of Italy, How to Visit Them*, John Lane, London, 1912

Lee, Vernon, *Genius Loci*, John Lane, London, 1908

- *The Golden Keys*, John Lane, London, 1925

- *Studies Of The Eighteenth Century In Italy*, T.F. Unwin, London, 1907, second edition; first edition: W. Satchell, London 1880

Lucas, Joseph, *Our Villa In Italy*, Unwin, London, 1913, second edition 1919

Luhan, Mabel Dodge, *European Experiences*, Harcourt, Brace and Co., New York, 1935.

Masson, Georgina, *Italian Garden*, Thames & Hudson, London 1961

Nichols, Rose Standish, *Italian Pleasure Gardens*, Dodd, Mead and Co, New York, 1928

Origo, Benedetta, etc, *La Foce: A Garden and Landscape In Italy*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2001

Origo, Iris, *Images & Shadows*, Murray, London, 1970

- *War in Val d'Orcia: An Italian War Diary, 1943-44*, Cape, London, 1947

Ouida, *Friendship*, first published 1878, this edition Chatto & Windus, London, 1914

Paget, Walburga, Lady, *The Linings of Life*, Hurst & Blakett, London, 1923

- *In My Tower*, Hutchinson, London, 1923

- *Embassies of Other Days*, Hutchinson, 1923

Pater, Walter, *The Renaissance*, first pub'd 1873, this edition Thomas Mosher, Portland Maine, 1902

Platt, Charles, *Italian Gardens*, Harper, New York, 1894, repub'd Timber Press 1993

Pliny, Betty Radice, (trans) *The Letters of the Younger Pliny*, Penguin Classics, London, 1963

Ross, Janet, *Italian Sketches*, Kegan Paul, London, 1887

Ross, Janet, *Leaves From Our Tuscan Kitchen*, John Murray, London, 1899, repub'd 1973

- *Florentine Palaces and their Stories*, J.M. Dent, London, 1905

- *Old Florence Modern Tuscany*, J.M. Dent, London, 1904

- *Lives Of the Early Medici*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1910

Ruskin, John, *Sesame and Lilies*, George Allen, Kent, 1887

Scott, Geoffrey, *The Architecture of Humanism*, Architectural Press, London 1914, repub'd 1980

Sitwell, George, *On The Making of Gardens*, Duckworth, London, 1909

Sitwell, Osbert, *Tales My Father Taught Me*, Hutchinson, London, 1962

Turner, Richard, *La Pietra*, Edizioni Olivares, Florence, 2002.

Wharton, Edith, *Italian Villas and their Gardens*, The Century Co, New York, 1904, repub'd Da Capo, New York, 1988

Secondary Sources

Books

Bayliss, Sir Wyke, *Seven Angles of the Renaissance*, Pitman, Bath, 1905

Calloway, Stephen, *Baroque Baroque*, Phaidon, London, 1994

Chatfield, Judith, *The Classic Italian Garden*, Rizzoli, New York, 1991

Coffin, David, ed., *The First Dumbarton Oaks Colloquium on The History of Landscape Architecture: The Italian Garden, Dumbarton Oaks*, Washington, 1972

Colonna, Francesco, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, 1499, this edition: entire text with original woodcuts, tr. Jocelyn Godwin, Thames & Hudson, London, 1999

Fantoni, Marcello, *Gli anglo-americani a Firenze*, Bulzoni, Florence, 1992

Fantoni, Marcello, Heidi Flores and John Pfordresher, *Cecil Pinsent and his Gardens in Tuscany*, Edifir, Florence, 1996

Gunn, Peter, *Vernon Lee, Violet Paget*, Oxford University Press, London 1964

Hill, May, *On Foreign Soil: American Gardeners Abroad*, Abrams, New York, 2005

Hitchmough, Wendy, *Arts and Crafts Gardens*, V&A Publishing, London, 2005

Jones, Marchegiani Irene & Haeussler, Thomas, ed.; *The Poetics of place, Florence Imagined*, Leo Olshki Editore, 2001, Florence

Jullian, Philippe & Phillips, John, *Violet Trefusis, Life and Letters*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1976

Lazzaro, Claudia, *The Italian Renaissance Garden*, Yale, New Haven, 1990

Leavitt, David, *Florence, A Delicate Case*, Bloomsbury, London, 2002

Levy, Michael, *Florence: A Portrait*, Random House, London, 1996

Mariano, Nicky, *Forty Years with Berenson*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1966

McCarthy, Mary, *The Stones of Florence*, Heinemann, London, 1959

Mignani, Daniela, *The Medicean Villas by Giusto Utens*, Arnaud, Florence, 2004

Moorehead, Caroline, Iris Origo, *Marchesa of Val D'Orcia*, Murray, London, 2000

Pestelli, Andrea, *The Castle of Montegufoni*, Edizioni Il Fiorino, Florence, 2002

Pozzana, Mariachiara, A Guide to Villa Gamberaia, Edizioni Polistampa, Florence, 1999

Pemble, John, *The Mediterranean Passion*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987

Quest-Ritson, Charles, *The English Garden Abroad*, Viking, London, 1992

Raison, Laura, ed., *Tuscany: An Anthology*, Cadogan, London 1983

Richardson, Tim, *English Gardens in the Twentieth Century*, Arum Press, London, 2005

Russell, Vivian, *Edith Wharton's Italian Gardens*, Frances Lincoln, London, 1997

Samuels, Ernest, *Bernard Berenson, The Making of a Connoisseur*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1979

Secrest Meryle, *Being Bernard Berenson*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1980

Sprigge, Sylvia, *Berenson: A Biography*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1960

Shacklock, Vincent, *Villa Le Balze*, Georgetown University, Florence, 1995

Strachey, Barbara & Samuels, Jayne, *Mary Berenson, A Self Portrait From Her Letters and Diaries*, Gollancz, London, 1983

Tomasi, Lucia, *The Flowering of Florence: Botanical Art For The Medici*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2002

Treves, G. Artom, *The Golden Ring: The Anglo-Florentines* 1847-1862, Longmans, London, English Translation, 1956, Sylvia Sprigge

Vitruvius, *The Ten Books on Architecture*, Translator: Morris Morgan, Harvard University Press, 1914, repub'd. Dover, New York, 1960

Von Arnim, Elizabeth, *Elizabeth and her German Garden*, McMillan, London, 1898, repub'd., Virago, London, 1986

Waugh, Evelyn, *Brideshead Revisited*, Chapman, London 1945, (this edition, Everyman, London, 1993).

Wharton, Edith, *A Backward Glance*, Scribner, New York, 1933, rep. Constable, London 1972

Articles, papers

Anon, (1932), 'Le Balze' *Architectural Review*, LXXI, p. 6

Anon, (1912), 'An Italian Garden', *Gardener's Chronicle*, 11 May, p. 315

Attlee, Helena, (2004), 'Burnished by the Sun of a Hundred Summers', *Hortus*, Autumn, No.71, p. 40

Bowe, Patrick, (1990), 'I Tatti', *Country Life*, 5 July, p. 90

Campbell, Katie, (2005) 'The Renaissance Remembered: Cecil Pinsent and the Anglo-Florentine Garden', *Hortus*, Spring, No. 73, p. 45

Elliot, Brent, (2000), 'Historical Revivalism in the Twentieth Century', *Garden History*, summer, 28:1, p.17

Eubank, H. (1898) untitled full-page article, *Gardener's Chronicle*: 3 December, p.397

Galletti, Giorgio, (2005), 'Early Twentieth Century Gardens: Revival or a New Style', Images and Shadows: Anglo-Italian Cross-Fertilisations Conference, Hestercombe Gardens Trust, Cheddon Fitzpaine, Taunton, 17-19 June, 2005.

Hobhouse, Penelope, (1987) 'The Gardens of the Villa La Foce', Hortus, Autumn, No 3, p. 73

Jellicoe, Geoffrey, (1977) 'Comments on the Drawings of Italian Gardens, by FM Piper', *Garden History*, Winter, 5:3, p. 78

Tipping, H. Avary, (1910) 'Villa Sylvia', 16 July, p. 90

Whitney, Fred, (1978) 'La Pietra', *Country Life*, 30 March, p. 828

Others: Websites; Conversations etc.

Dakin-Elliot, Nicholas, 9 May, 2006, La Pietra, Florence, Italy.

Galletti, Giorgio, 9 May, 2006, Florence, Italy.

Grieco, Alan, 10 May, 2006, I Tatti, Florence, Italy.

'Images and Shadows: Anglo-Italian Cross-Fertilisations', Conference, Hestercombe Gardens Trust, Cheddon Fitzpaine, Taunton, 17-19 June, 2005.

Appendix 1: Dramatis Personae

Arthur **Acton**: (1873-1953) Beaux-Arts trained artist turned dealer, who purchased La Pietra, restoring the baroque villa, creating a noted garden around it.

Harold **Acton** (1904-1994): Arthur Acton's son; preserved and promoted the villa while writing books on Italian history.

Kinta **Beevor**: (1911-1995) Janet Ross' niece; wrote vividly about growing up in Anglo-Florentine community in A Tuscan Childhood, 1993.

Bernard **Berenson**: (1865-1959) art historian; presided at I Tatti; initiated interest in early Tuscan Primitive painters.

Mary **Berenson** nee Pearsal Smith: (1864-1945: his wife; art historian; with Cecil Pinsent, transformed the farmhouse of I Tatti into an elegant villa and garden.

Francesco **Bocci**: Italian writer whose 1591 guide to Florence *Le Bellezze della Citta di Firoenza* provides vivid descriptions of urban and suburban gardens.

Earl and Lady **Crawford and Balcarres**: late nineteenth century owners of Il Palmieri.

Lady Sybil **Cutting** (d. 1942): Anglo-American bluestocking who restored the Villa Medici, renowned as the first humanist villa.

Donald Harold **Eberlein**: American writer; *Villas of Florence and Tuscany* 1922.

Georgina **Graham**: an early Anglo-Florentine who writes a xenophobic account of her horticultural efforts in her 1902 *In a Tuscan Garden.*

Sir John Temple **Leader** (1810-1903): restored the ancient Villa Maiano; reconstructed the ruined castle of Vincigliata, reforested the hillside between them.

Vernon **Lee**: (1856-1935) pen name of Violet Paget; internationally renowned essayist, promoted the baroque style, especially as related to horticulture.

Joseph **Lucas**: mysterious figure whose 1913 *Our Villa in Italy* lovingly describes creating a garden round his villa in San Domenico, north of Florence.

Mable Dodge **Luhan**: (1879-1922) American heiress who, with her second husband, the Beaux-Arts trained architect, Edwin Dodge, restored the Villa Curonia before quitting the community and settling, in Taos New Mexico.

Nicky **Mariano**: Berenson's accommodating secretary, who inhabited I Tatti with the Berenson and remained after Mary's death as Berenson's companion.

Georgina **Masson**: Garden historian whose 1961 *Italian Gardens* sparked interest in the subject.

Rose Standish **Nichols**: American garden writer and first female American garden designer, her 1928 *Italian pleasure Gardens* fed interest in the subject.

Iris **Origo** (1902-1988): daughter of Sybil Cutting, with her Italian husband Antonio restored the 3,500 acre estate La Foce, and created a noted garden around its baroque villa.

Ouida (1839-1908): pseudonym of Louise de Ramee, an eccentric English novelist whose settled in Florence where *Friendship* her vicious 1878 *roman a clef* exposed the Anglo-Florentine community as pretentious, greedy, mendacious and insensitive.

Walburga, Lady **Paget** (1839-1929): widowed wife of Augustus Paget, British ambassador, variously, to Florence, Rome, Copenhagen and Vienna; published eight volumes of diaries and letters, restored the medieval Torre de Bellosguardo.
Cecil **Pinsent** (1884-1963); influential British architect who designed for the Anglo-Florentine community, evolving a modern approach to villa gardens.

Charles **Platt** (1861-1933); garden architect whose 1894 *Italian Gardens* was the first book in English on the subject.

Janet **Ross**: (1842-1927): prolific writer on Italian history; farmed her medieval estate Poggio Gherardo.

Geoffrey **Scott** (1884-1929); British architectural critic whose influential *The Architecture of Humanism* (1914) helped revive the taste for Baroque design.

Lady **Scott**: daughter of the Duke of Portland; late nineteenth century owner of Villa Capponi

Sir George **Sitwell** (1860-1943): eccentric aristocrat whose 1909 *On The Making of Gardens* posthumously become a classic; restored the medieval Montegufoni.

Sir Osbert **Sitwell** (1892-1906): his son; preserved the estate and wrote amusingly about his father in various books.

William Blundell **Spence** (1815-1900) late nineteenth century owner of Villa Medici; painter and art dealer.

Sir Frederick **Stibbert** (1838-1906): eccentric collector housed his collection in the parkland setting around his Villa Stibbert.

Charles **Strong** (1862-1940): owner of Le Balze, first Italian villa designed by Pinsent.

Lina **Waterfield** (1874-1964): Janet Ross's niece and ward; wrote on Italian politics and history; with her husband Aubrey Waterfield (d.1944) she restored the medieval fortress of Aulla in Lunigiana where he created a 'sky garden' on the roof; ran Poggio Gherardo after Ross's death.

Edith **Wharton** (1862-1937): American novelist and garden writers whose influential 1904 *Italian Villas and their Gardens* inspired a revival of interest in the subject.

Appendix 2: Other Notable Gardens of the Anglo-Florentine Community

There were, of course, other notable gardens and other fascinating garden-makers among the Anglo-Florentine community. Mable Dodge Luhan was suitably formidable, independent and literary. Having found her crumbling Villa Curonia, she left her husband Edwin Dodge, a beaux-arts trained architect, to restore the villa while she fashioned a rose-embellished Renaissance garden in which to conduct her liaisons and host her soirees. But Luhan was too wealthy to fit the mould, she was also American, but crucially, she deserted the community after several years, bored by its effete scholarship and relentless wallowing in the past.

Mrs. George Keppel is another candidate; impeccably English, the consort of a King, she arrived in Florence seeking discreet retirement and found her Villa L'Ombrellino, named for the 19th century Chinese umbrella-shaped gazebo on the lawn. The house had an impeccable historical pedigree, having hosted Galileo in the early seventeenth century. In the true Anglo-Florentine fashion Keppel removed the accretions from its front terrace and replaced the Victorian palms with Venetian statues. But the house had no aesthetic merit and the garden, as Harold Acton averred, was little more than a parterre-pedestal for an overwhelming, and perhaps too 'all-embracing', view of Florence.[792] More importantly however, its owner was too cosmopolitan and not scholarly enough to be an integral part of the community. Osbert Sitwell described Mrs. Keppel as amusing, good natured and astute, and though she stayed with the Sitwells in Renishaw, it is likely that she, as he, was too grand or too frivolous to take much interest in the cultural and horticultural projects of the community.[793] A generation later Keppel's daughter Violet Trefusis maintained the tradition of scandal by conducting a very public love affair with Vita Sackville-West. Though a writer of scholarly essays and biographies she denied herself membership in the Anglo-Florentine community by focussing mainly on her French estate with its elaborate formal gardens.

---

[792] Acton, p. 269.
[793] Sitwell, Osbert, *Tales My Father Taught Me*, p. 104.

Another prominent early Anglo-Florentine with a noteworthy garden was the novelist known as Ouida. Taking as her pseudonym a childhood mis-pronunciation of her christened name, in 1871 Louisa de la Ramée retreated from furore which followed her publication of several sensational romance novels, quitting her native Bury St Edmunds for Florence. As Moorehead explained, 'in a city of oddities, Ouida was queen'.[794] Renowned for her indulgence towards her canine companions, Ouida rented the Villa Farinola, at Scandicci, where her dogs ate at table off priceless china and peed where they chose as their mistress felt house-training was cruel. Paget reports that Ouida could write a story worth £200 in three days, and that she was paid £1,600 each for her many novels, and though she spent the money as fast as she made it her apparent wealth attracted many unscrupulous suitors.[795] Dressed in Worth gowns, Ouida hosted literary salons, conceived grotesque passions for younger men and alienated the community with her *romans a clef*, particularly *Winter City* and *Friendship*, which cost her the friendships of Janet Ross and Lady Paget among others.

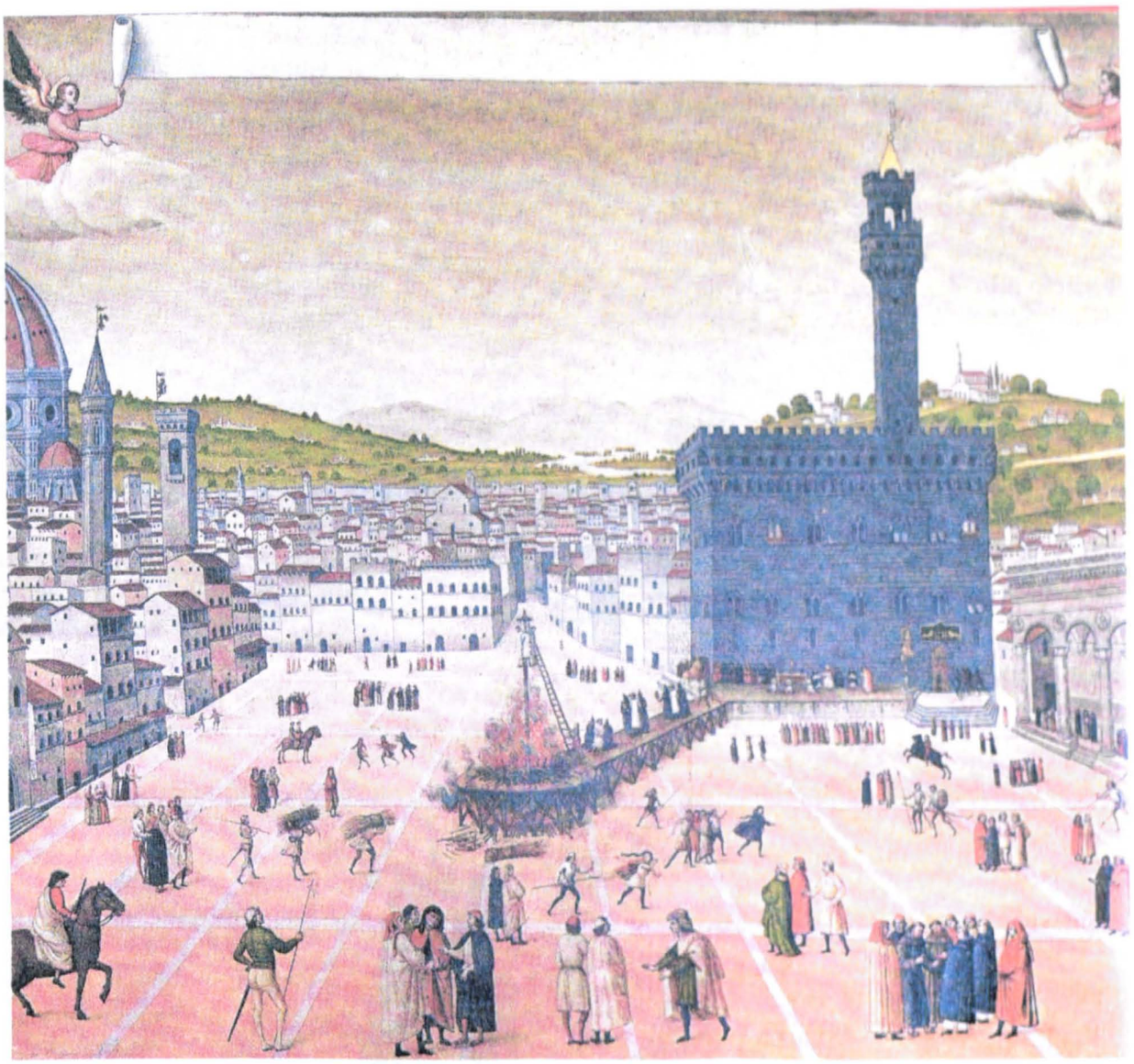
In her garden Ouida expressed her laissez-fair attitude, embracing English naturalism to an unnatural degree. Convinced that vegetation, like dogs, should be allowed to grow freely she forbad the gardener of her rented villa to trim any trees or shrubs, eventually provoking the landlord to evict her on a charge of neglect.[796] Moving to Viareggio, she replaced human with canine companions, taking in strays till her house was overrun with dogs. Though her novels of Italian life extol the rustic refinement and innate nobility of the Tuscan peasant, and she campaigned tirelessly for peasant's rights as well as animal welfare, Ouida ended her days impoverished, emaciated, shunned by her own community and persecuted by the local people.

[794] Moorehead, p. 28.
[795] Paget, *Linings*, p. 227.
[796] Quest-Ritson, p. 8.

Illustrations

1: Benozzo Gozzoli, *Procession of the Magi*, detail (1459-60)
Florence, Palazzo Medici-Riccardi

2: Villa Medici, wall plaque, author's photograph



3: Florentine painter, *Martyrdom of Savonarola in the Piazza dell Signoria*, circa 1498
Florence, San Marco Museum

4: Villa Maiano, tower, inspired by the Signoria, author's photograph

5: Montegufoni, tower, author's photograph

6: Giorgio Mignaty, *Casa Guidi living-room*, 1880
Viareggio, Instituto Matteucci,

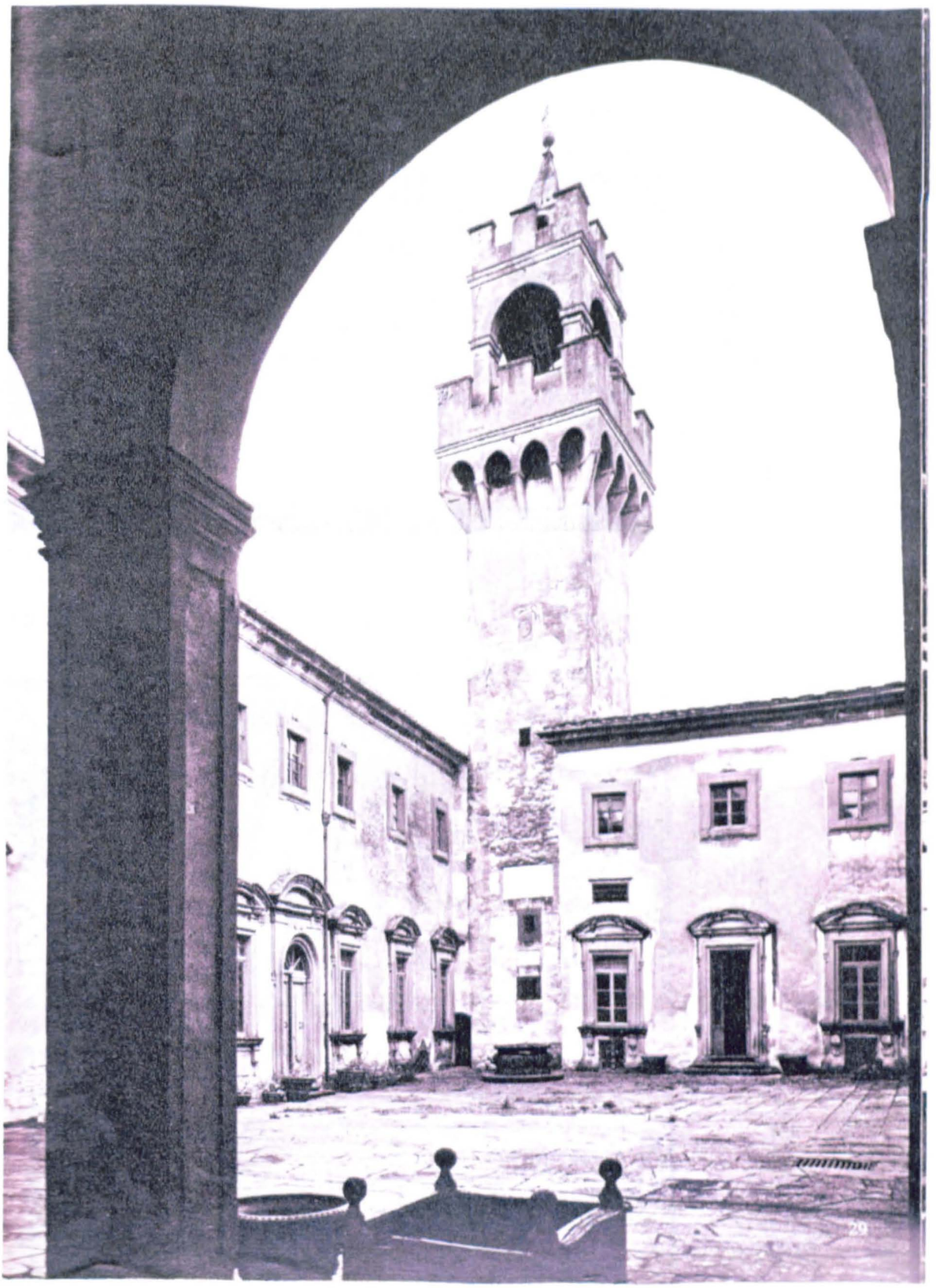
7: Carreggi, fortified ramparts transformed into a loggia, author's photograph

8: Villa Medici, author's photograph

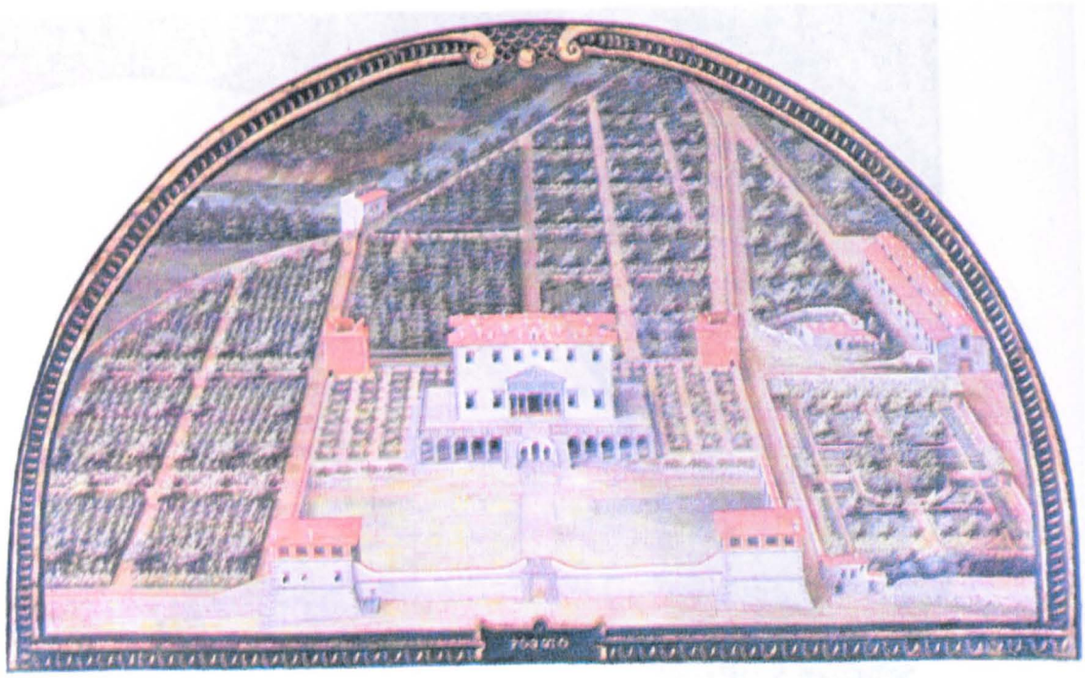
9: Poggio Gherardo, author's photograph

10: Vincigliata, publicity brochure

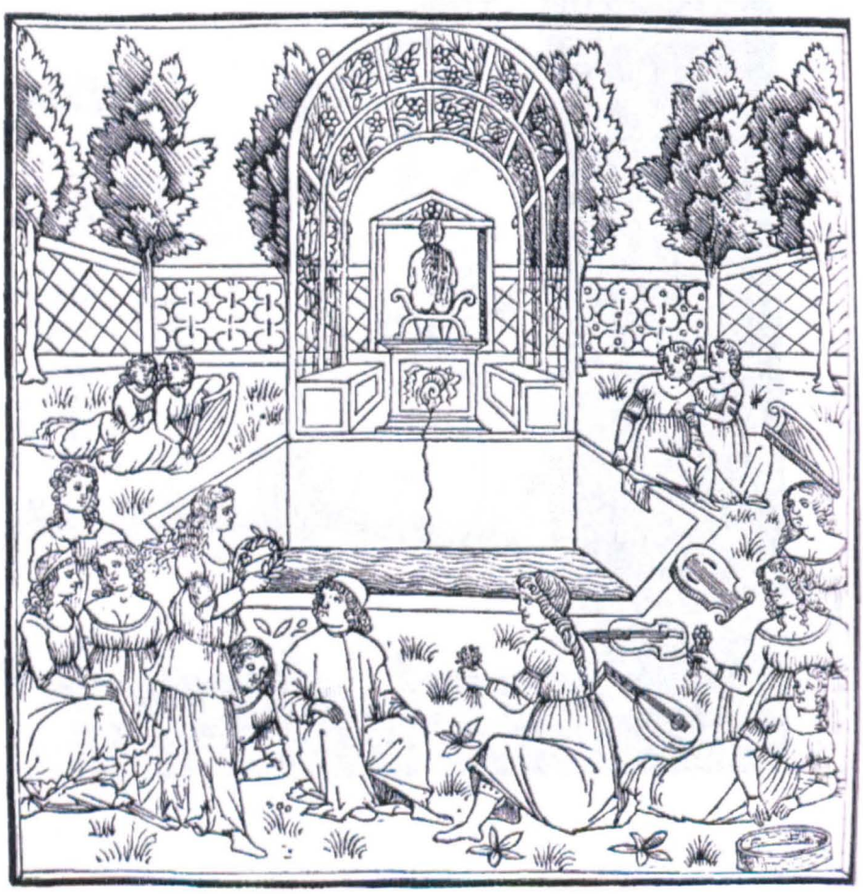
11: Bellosguardo, publicity brochure



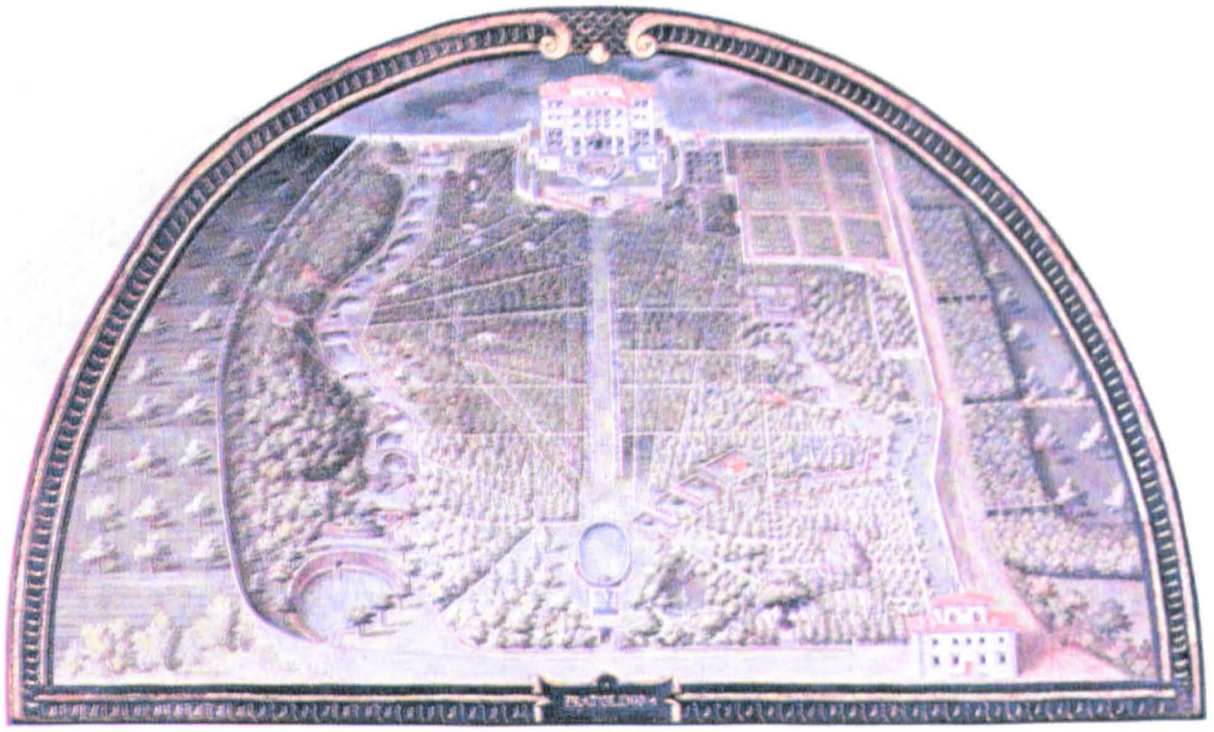
12: Montegufoni, main courtyard,
Acton, *Tuscan Villas*, p. 29



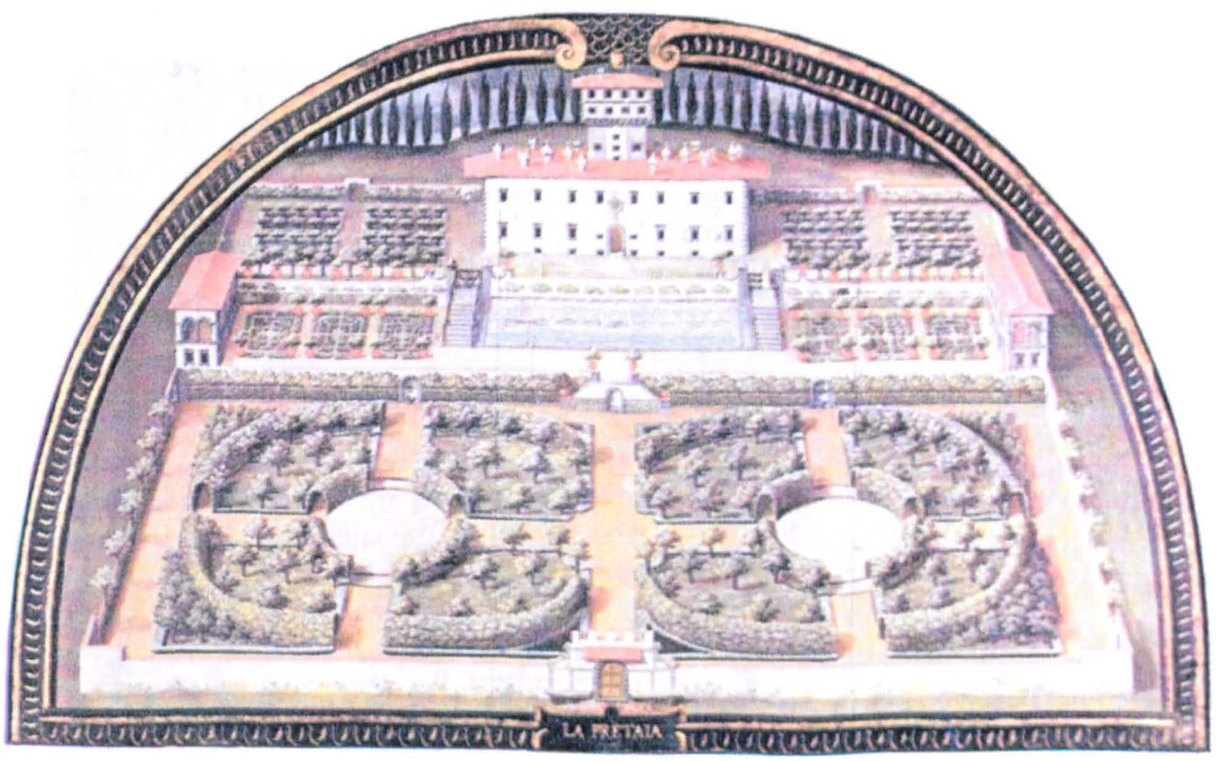
13: Giusto Utens, *Poggio a Caiano*, 1598-99
Florence, Topographical Museum, 'Firenze com'era' Topographical Museum



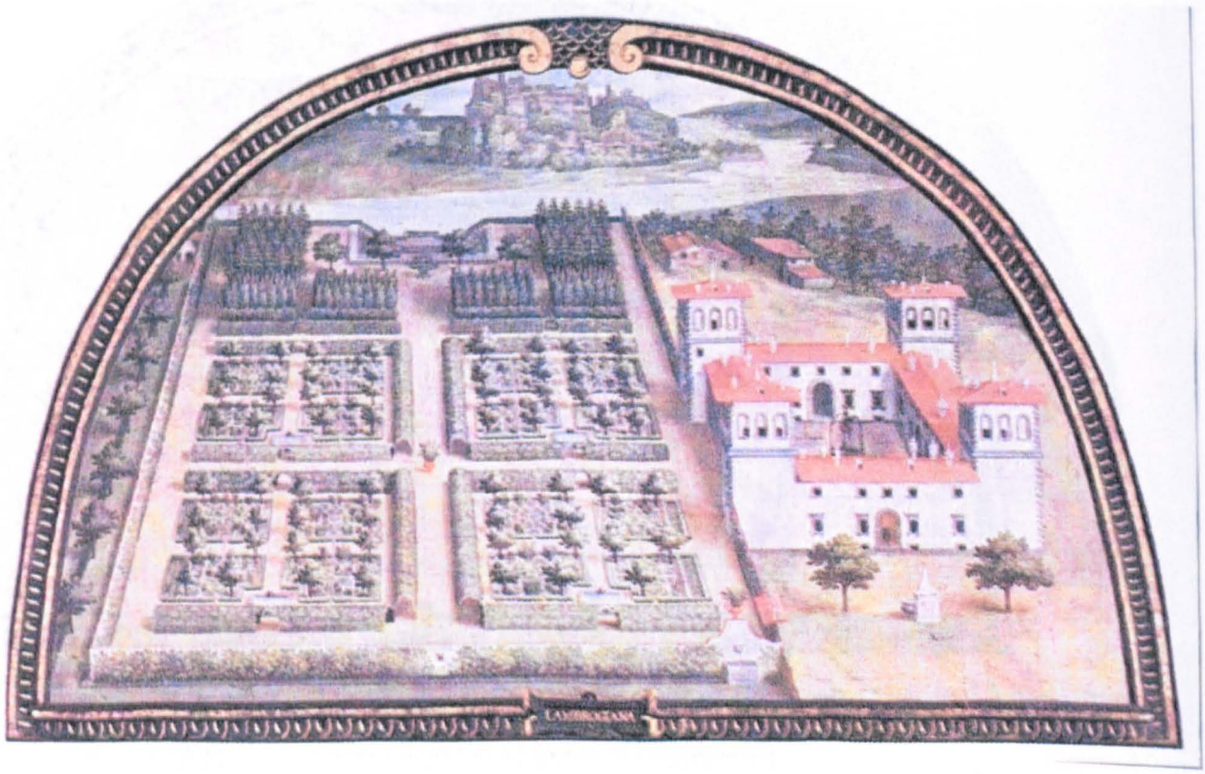
14: Woodcut, Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, p. 378



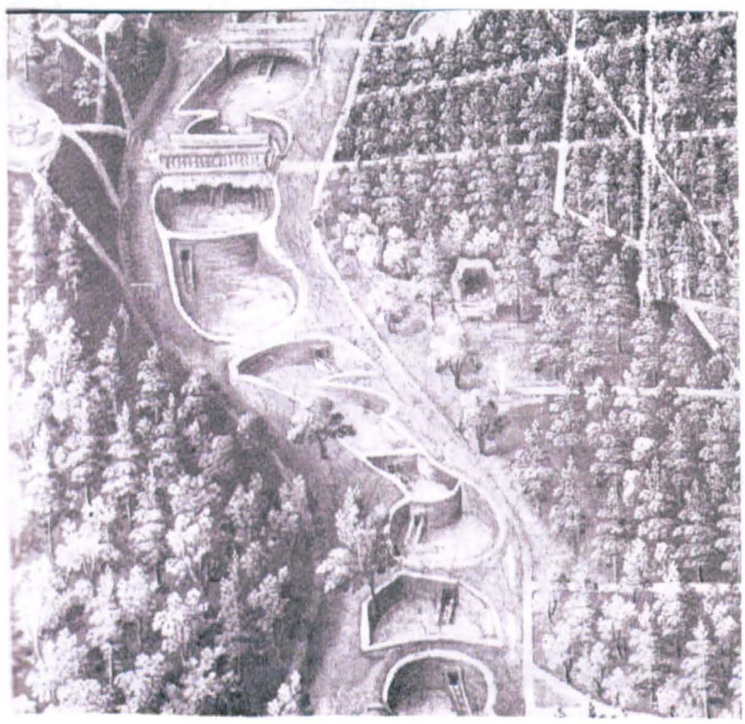
15: Giusto Utens, *Pratolino*, 1598-99
Florence, 'Firenze com'era' Topographical Museum



16: Giusto Utens, *La Petraia*, 1598-99
Florence, 'Firenze com'era' Topographical Museum



17: Giusto Utens, *L'Ambrogiana,* 1598-99
Florence, 'Firenze com'era' Topographical Museum



18: Giusto Utens, *Pratolino*, circa 1590, detail of waterworks
Florence, 'Firenze com'era' Topographical Museum

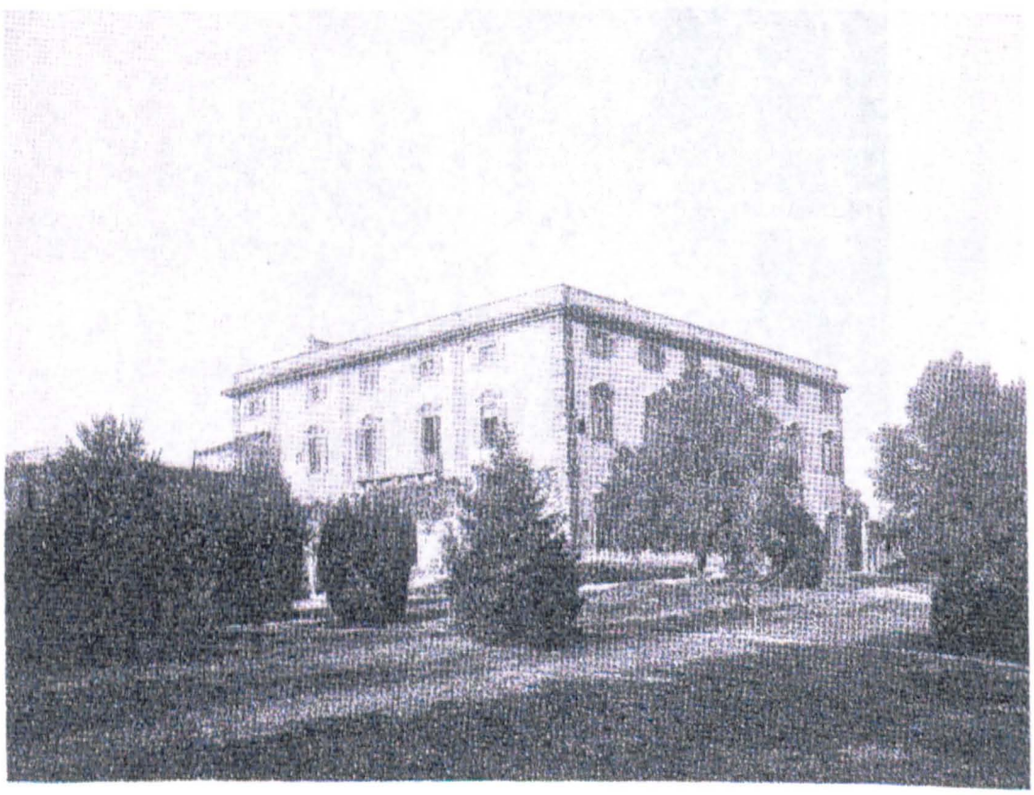
19: La Foce, Origo, *La Foce*, p. 33

20: La Pietra, author's photograph

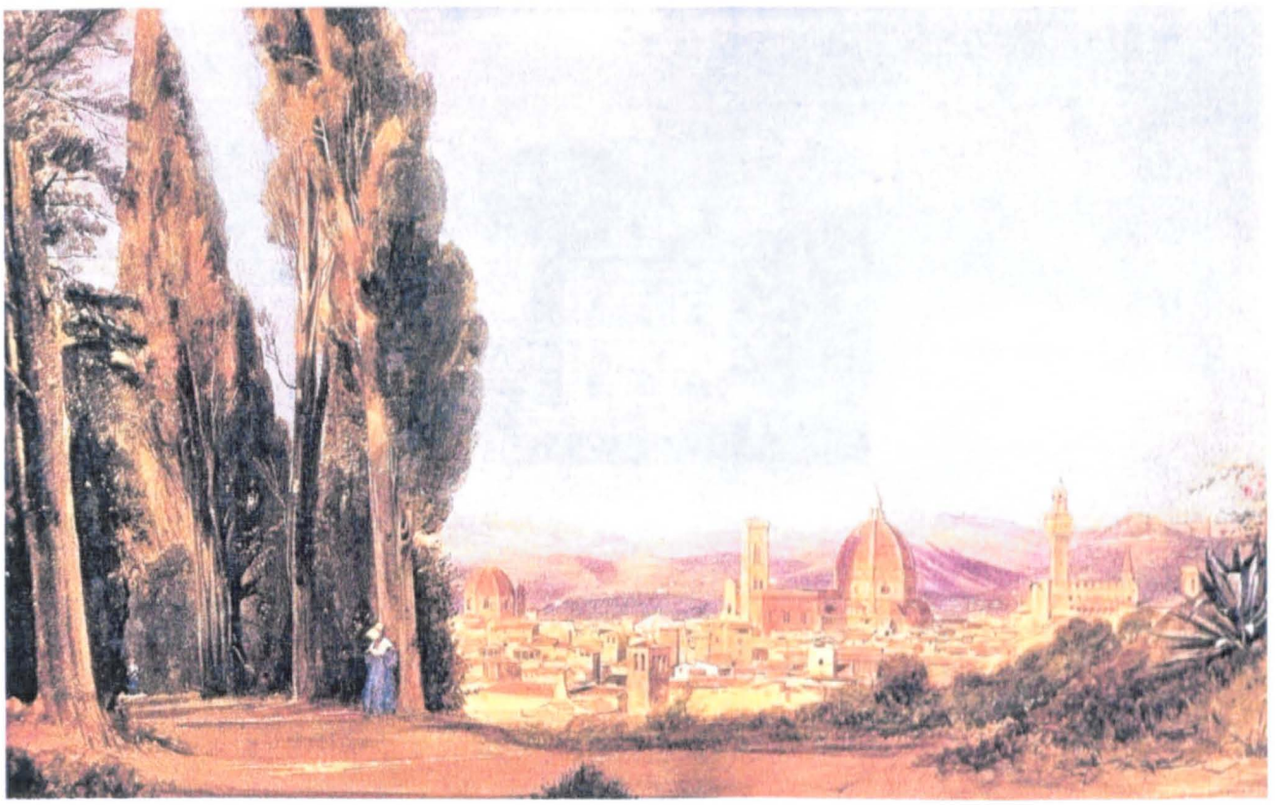
21: Il Palmieri, author's photograph

22: Villa Capponi, author's photograph

23: I Tatti, author's photograph

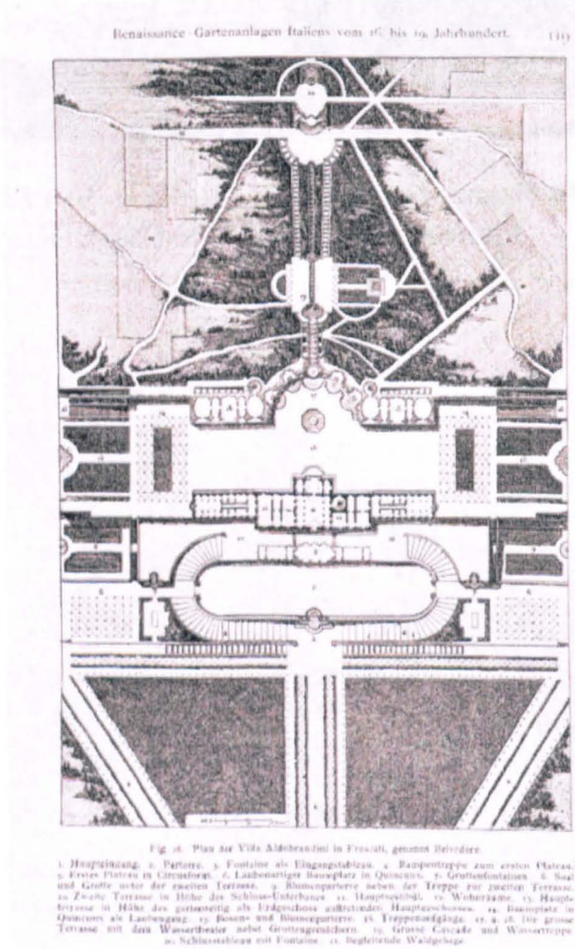


24: La Pietra, English-style gardens, late nineteenth century, Turner, *La Pietra,* p. 49



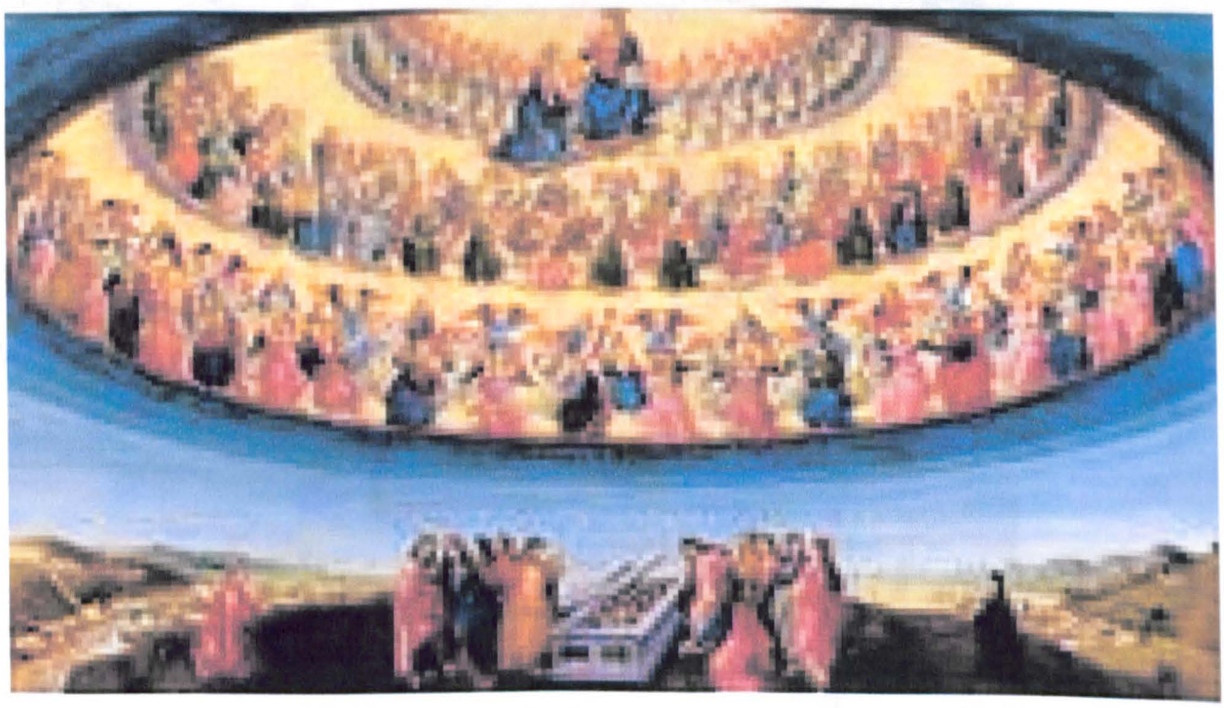
25: Thomas Hartley Cromeck, *View from Bellosguardo*, circa 1845
Florence, Collezione Ente Casa di Risparmio di Firenze

26: Villa Lante, from Charles Percier and Auguste Fontaine, *Choix des plus célèbres maisons de plaisannce de Rome et ses environs*, Paris, 1809, Rotch Library, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

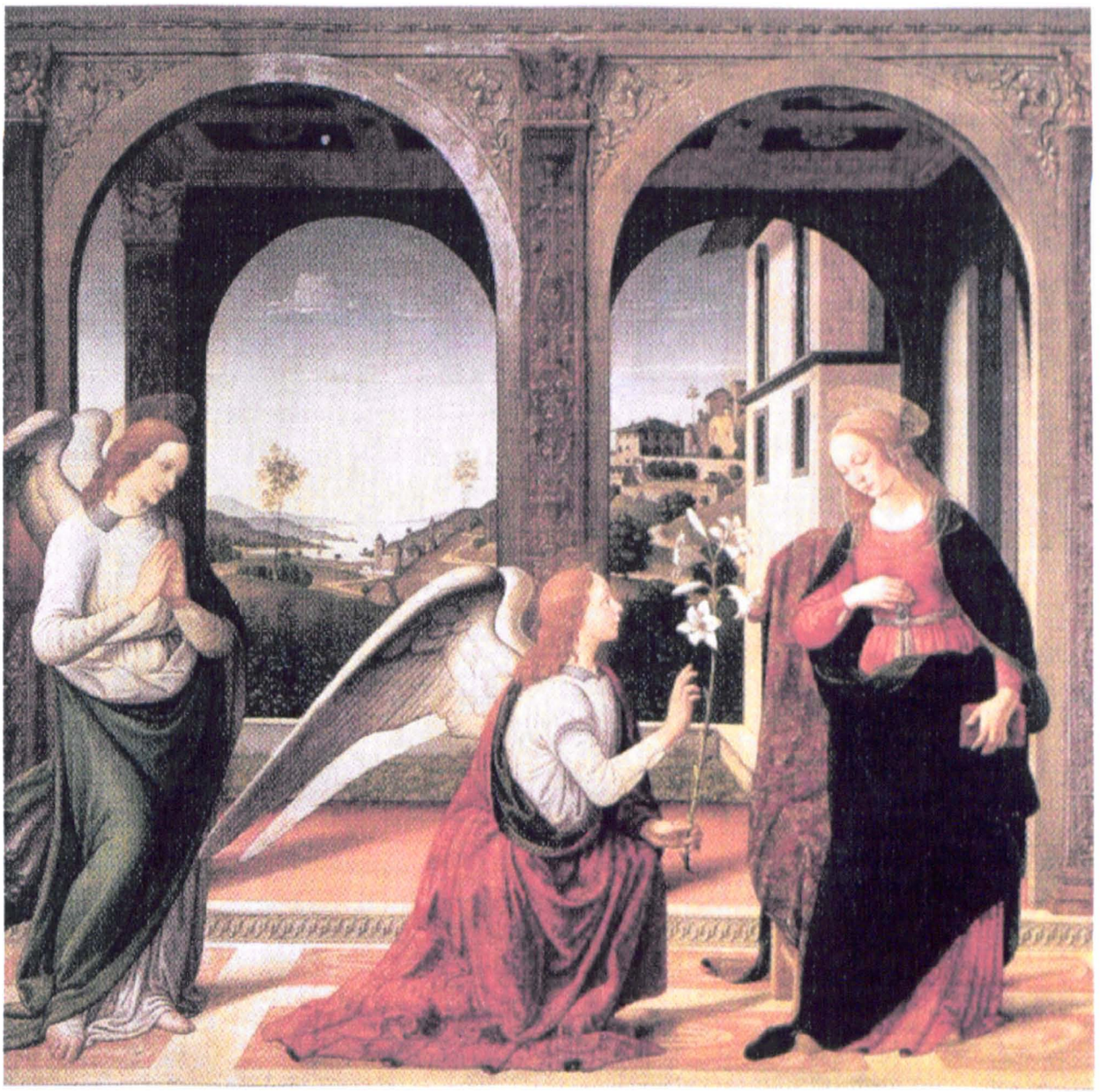


27: Villa Aldobrandini, from WP Tuckermann, *Die Gartenkunst der Italienischen Renaissance-Zeit*, Berlin 1884, Massachusetts Horticultural Society Library

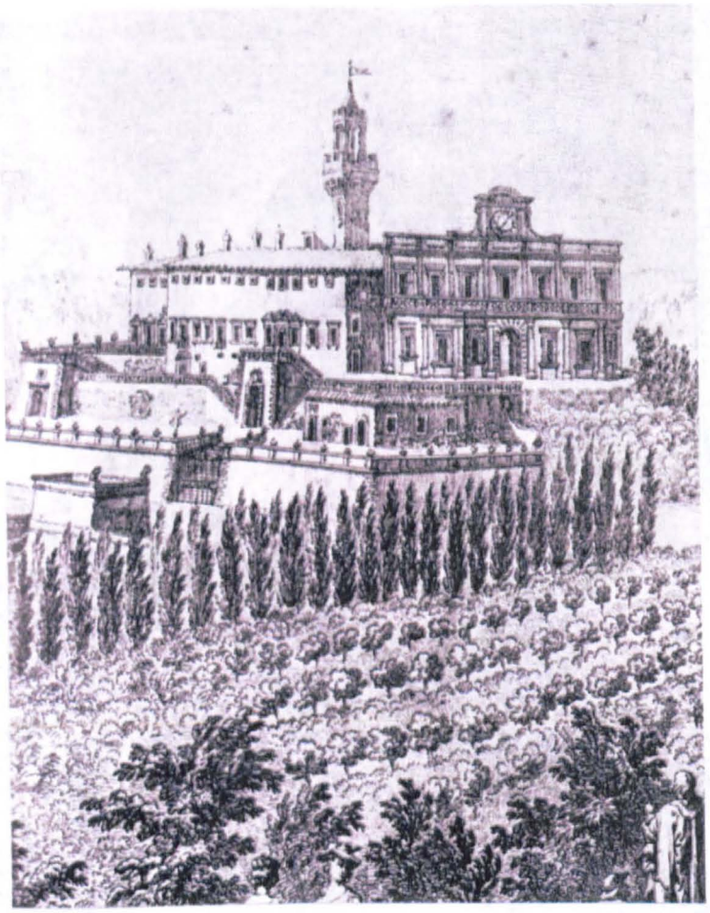
28: Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Dormitio Virginis*, detail, 1590
Florence, Santa Maria Novella, Tornabuoni Chapel



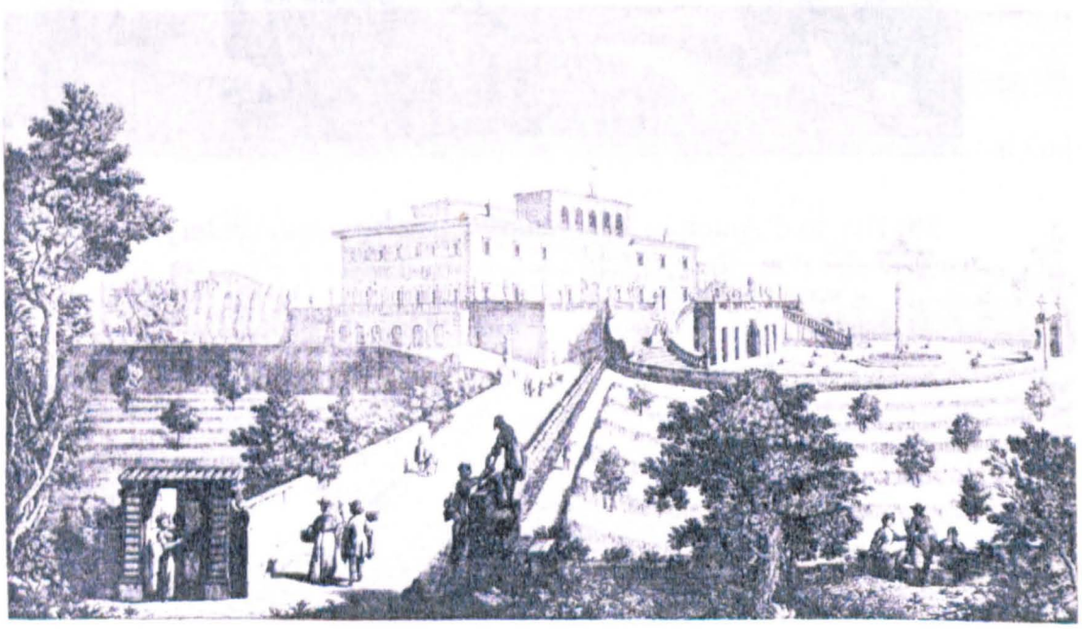
29: Francesco Botticini, *Assumption of the Virgin*, circa 1475, London, National Gallery



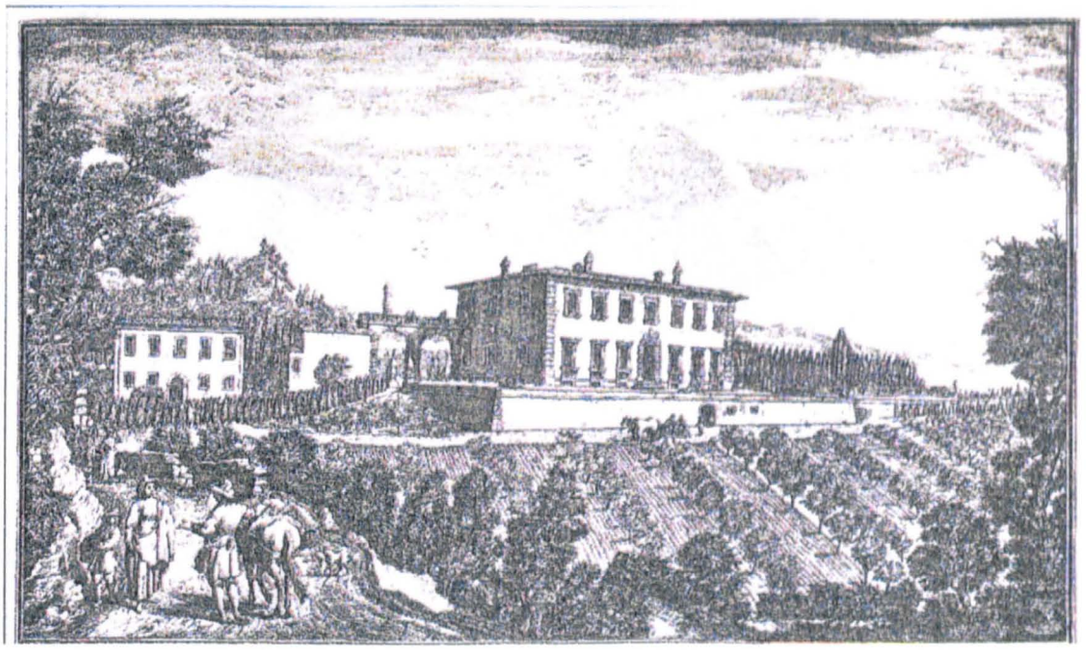
30: Biagio d'Antonio, *Annunciation*, late fifteenth century, Rome, Accademia di San Luca



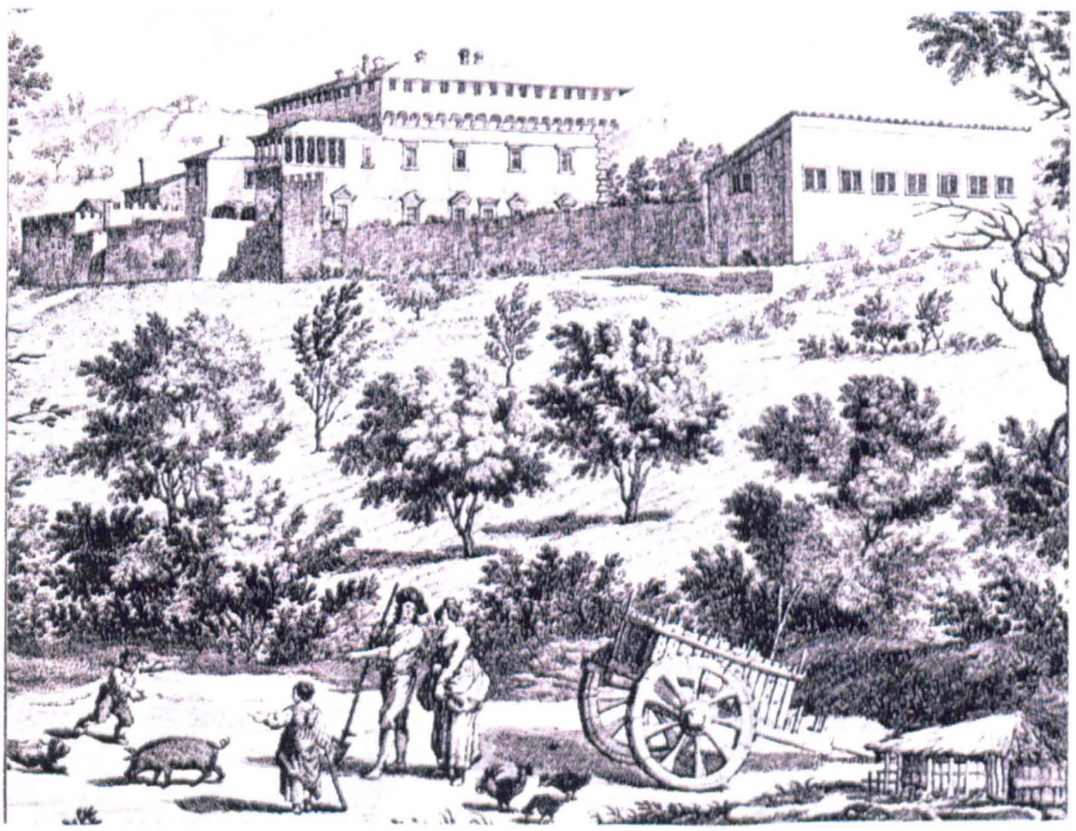
31: Guiseppe Zocchi, *Montegufoni*, circa 1744, Florence, 'Firenze com'era' Topographical Museum



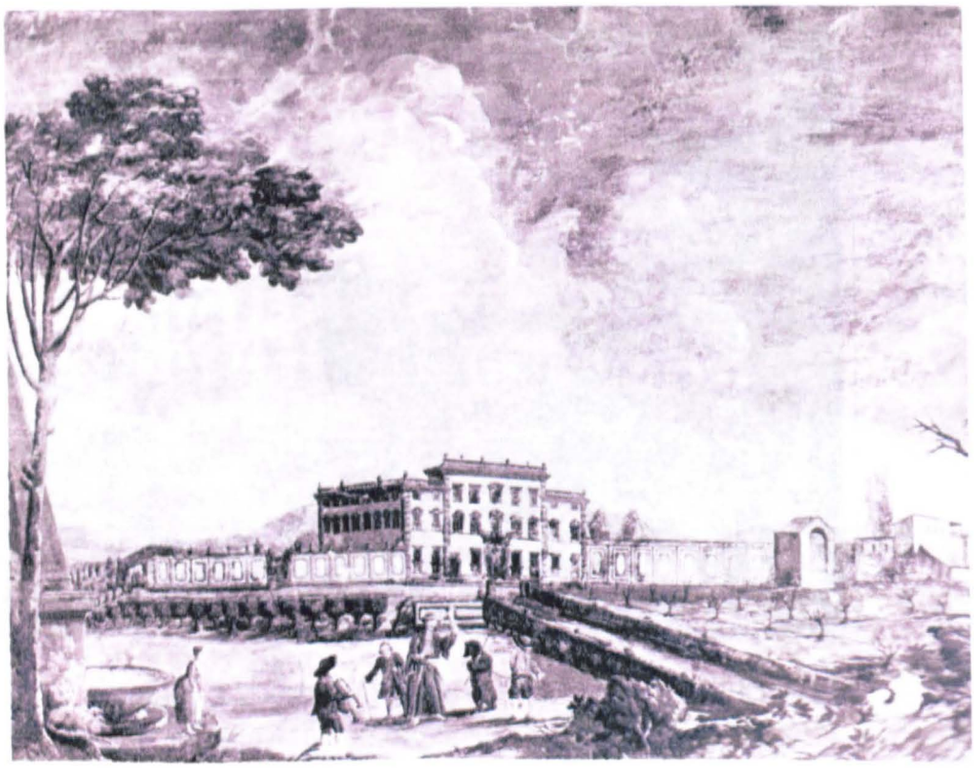
32: Guiseppe Zocchi, *Il Palmieri*, circa 1744, Florence, 'Firenze com'era' Topographical Museum



33: Guiseppe Zocchi, *Gamberaia*, circa 1744, Florence, 'Firenze com'era' Topographical Museum

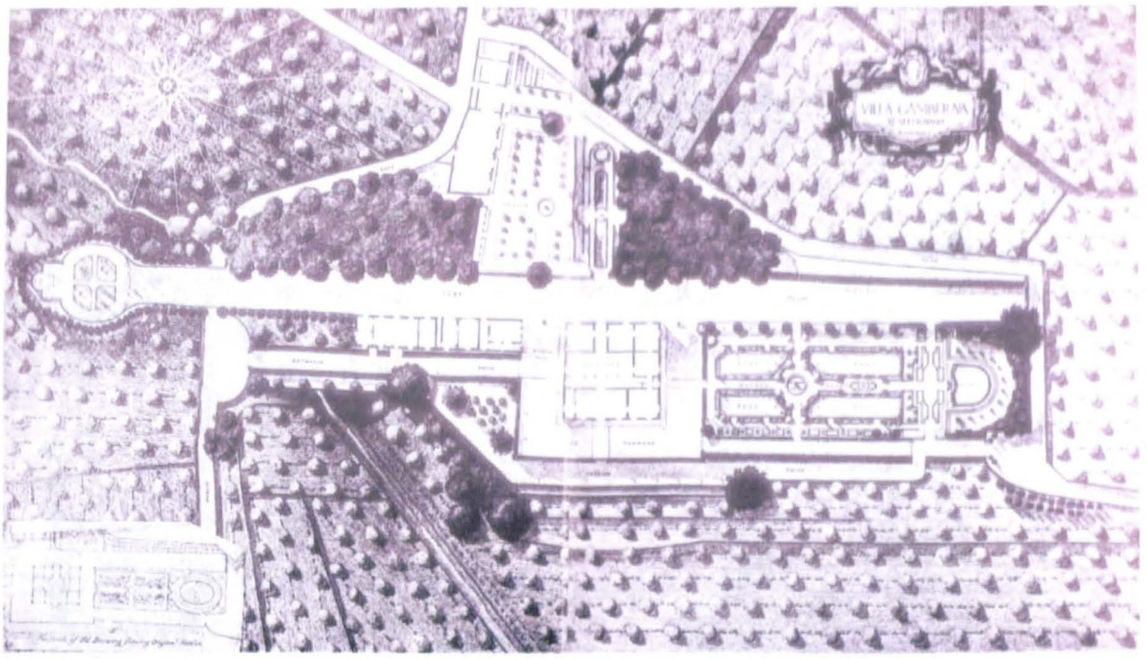


34: Guiseppe Zocchi, Careggi, circa 1744, Florence, 'Firenze com'era' Topographical Museum



35: Guiseppe Zocchi, *La Pietra*, circa 1744, Florence, 'Firenze com'era' Topographical Museum

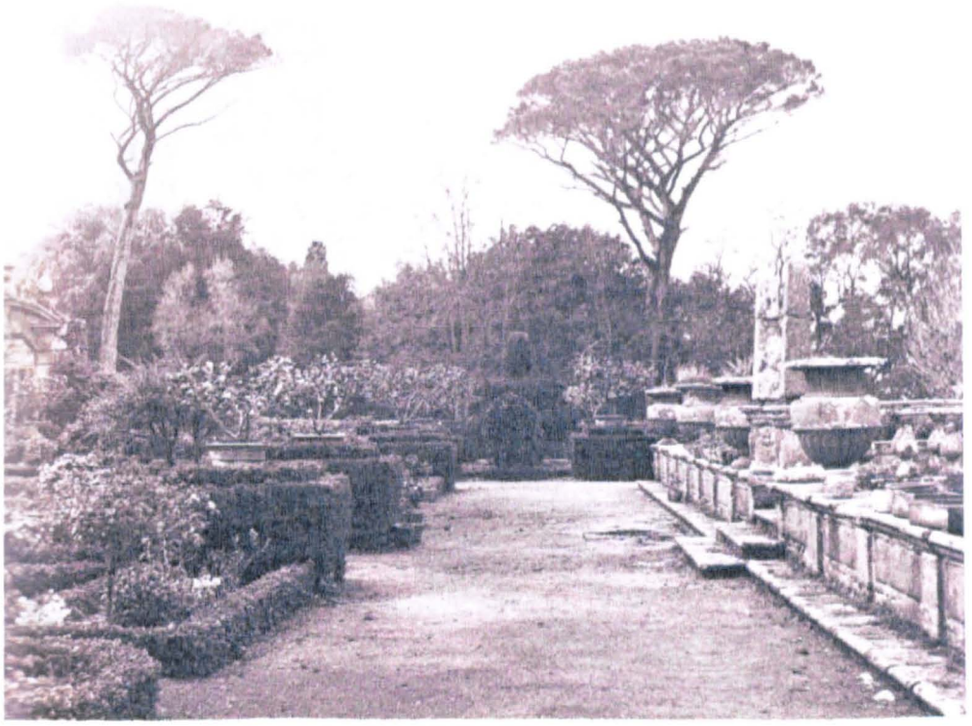
36: Unknown artist, *La Pietra*, circa 1750, on villa corridor wall near kitchen



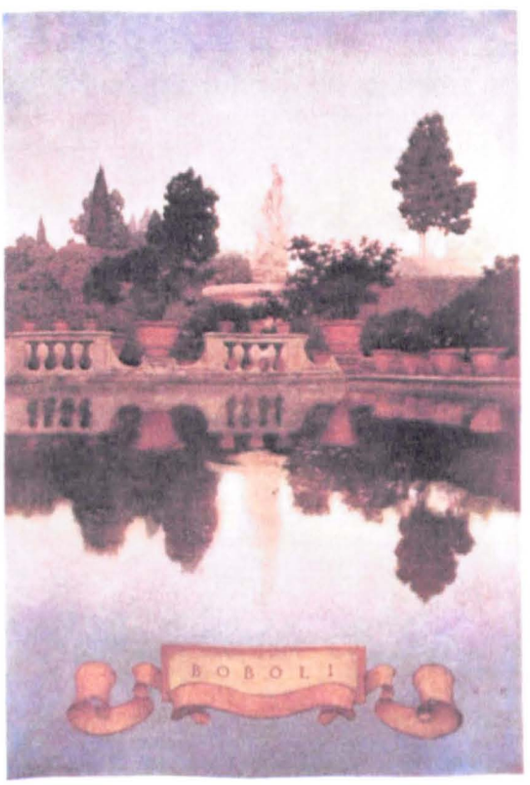
37: *Villa Gamberaia*, p*lan,* G Lawson, Landscape Architecture, VIII, January 1918
(Eighteenth century estate map in lower left corner0

38: Villa Gamberaia, water garden 1905, Latham, *The Gardens of Italy*

39: Villa Gamberaia, water gardens today, publicity brochure

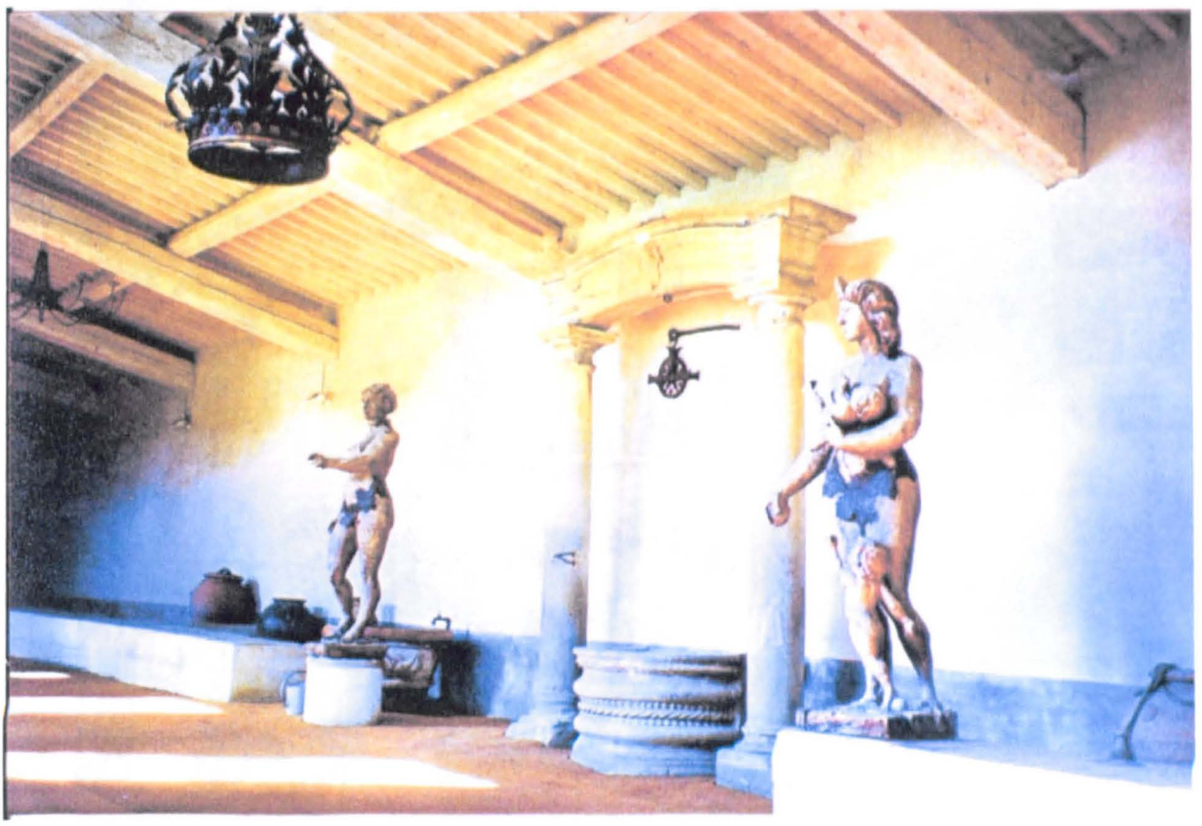


40: Villa Lante 1894, Platt, *Italian Garden*, unnumbered plate



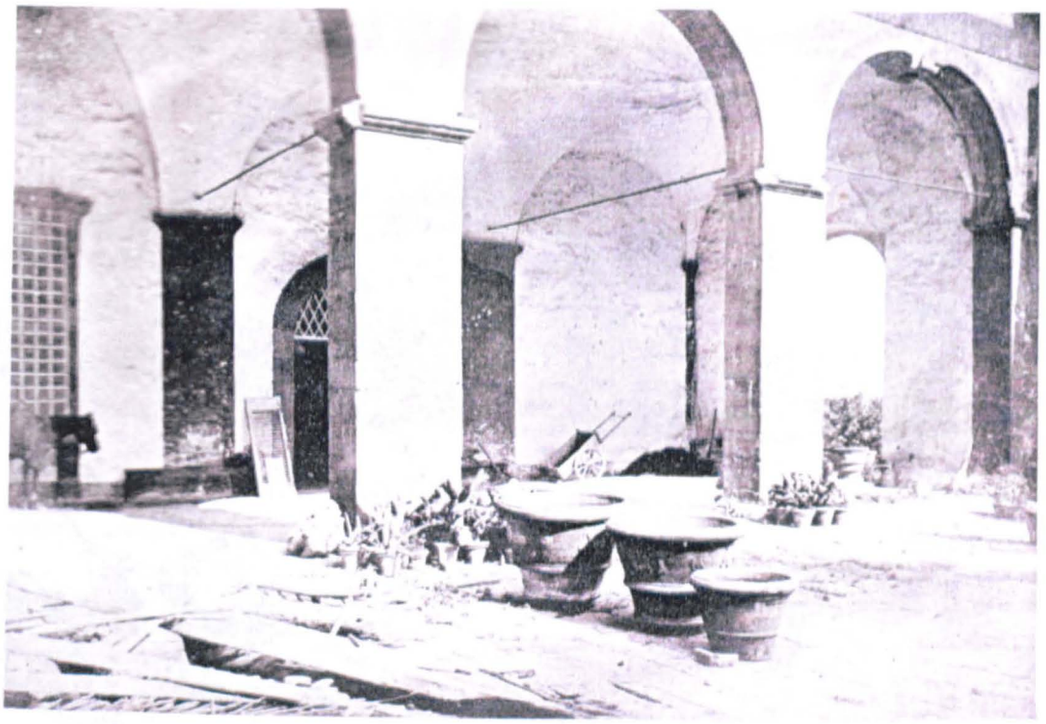
41: Maxfield Parrish, *Boboli*, Wharton, *Italian Villas*, unnumbered plate

42: George Elgood, *Villa Lante,* circa 1907, Elgood, *Italian Gardens*, unnumbered plate



43: La Pietra, limonaia, author's photograph
(empty in summer, it hosts large dinner parties)

44: Il Palmerino, villino, strawberry grape vine, author's photograph



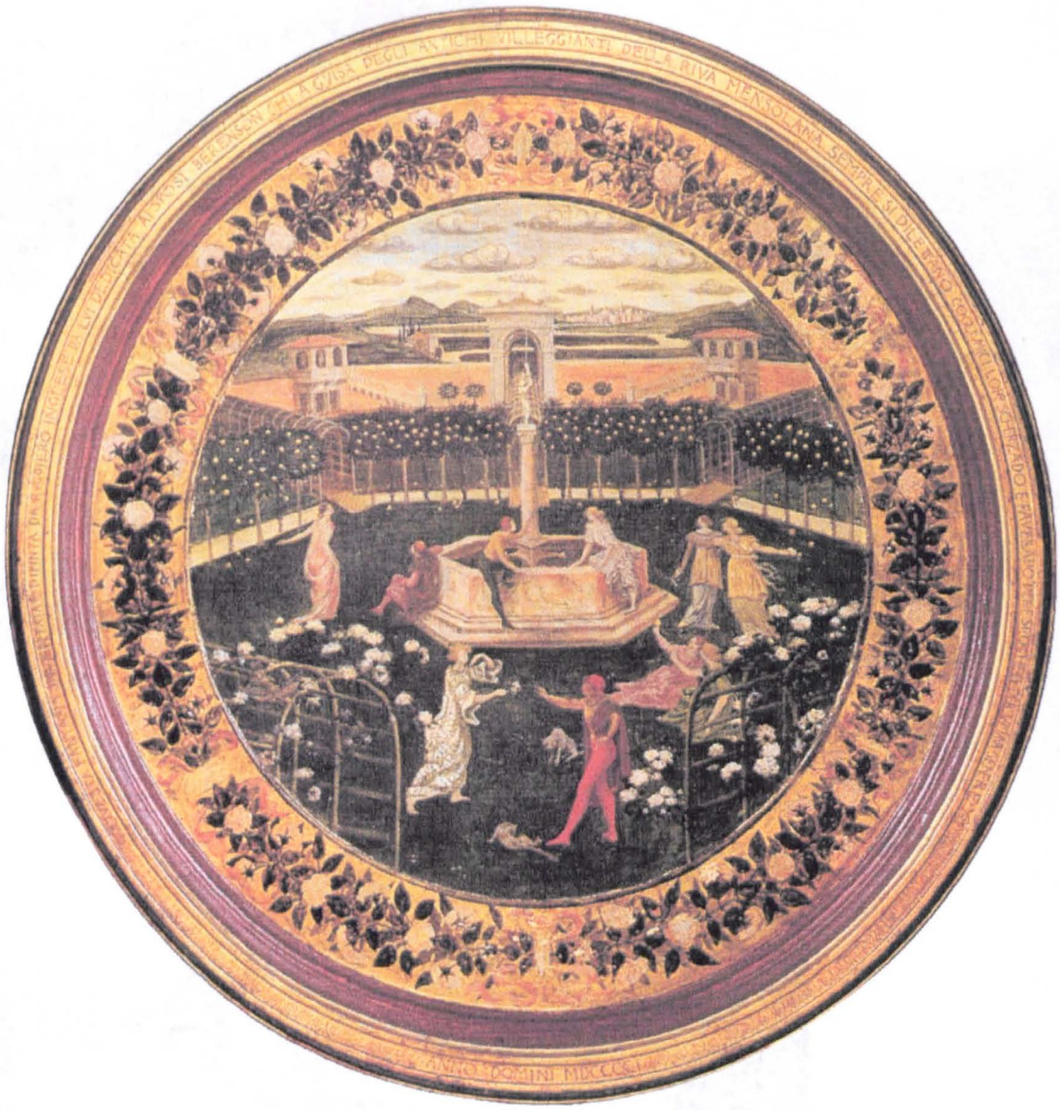
THE GALLERY AS I FOUND IT.

45: Bellosguardo, loggia before and after glazing, photograph: Paget, *Tower*, p. 14, sketch: recent publicity brochure

46: Oxen, Origo, *La Foce*, p. 28

47: Janet Ross overseeing the vendemmia, Beevor, *A Tuscan Childhood*, unnumbered plate

48: Vendemmia at Poggio Gherardo, Beevor, *A Tuscan Childhood*, unnumbered plate



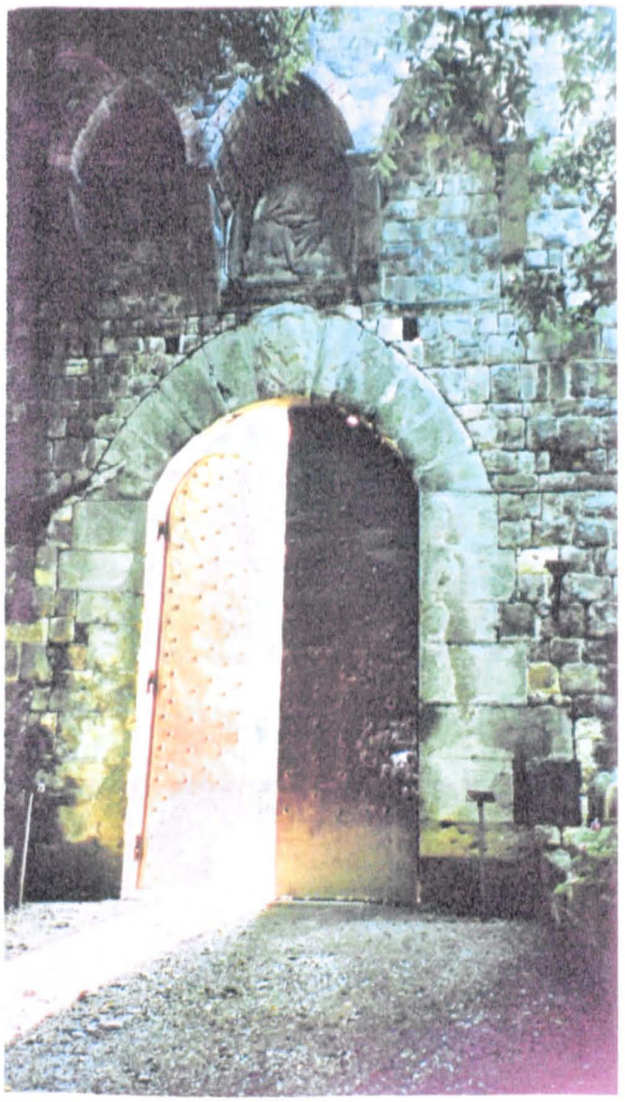
49: Roger Fry, *Giardino di delizie*, 1901, Florence, Villa I Tatti, Berenson Collection

50: Giardino della Colonna, tower, author's photograph

51: Giardino della Colonna, coffee house, author's photograph

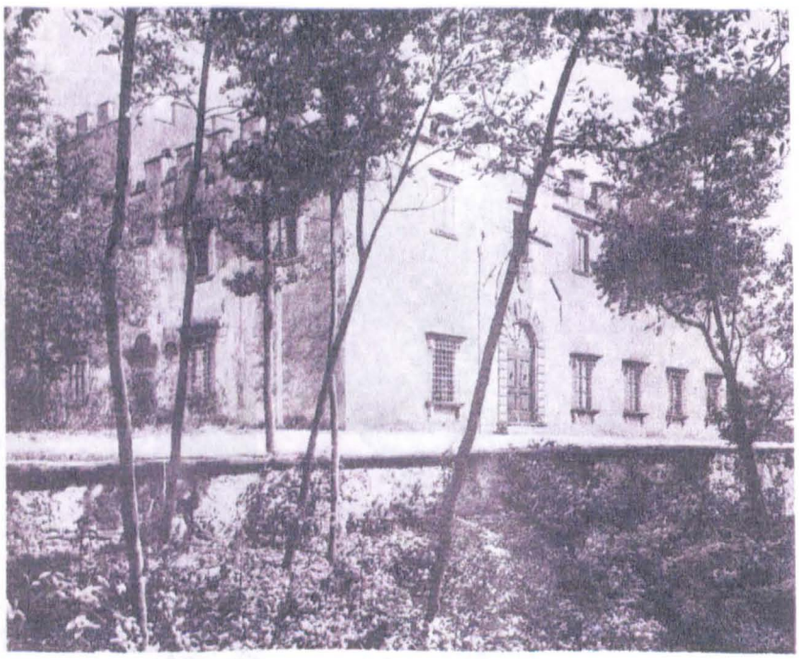
52: Villa Maiano, Villa archives

53: Vincigliata from Villa Maiano terrace, author's photograph



54: Vincigliata, main entrance, author's photograph

55: Vincigliata, view from turret, author's photograph



56: Poggio Gherardo, front façade, Beevor, *A Tuscan Childhood*

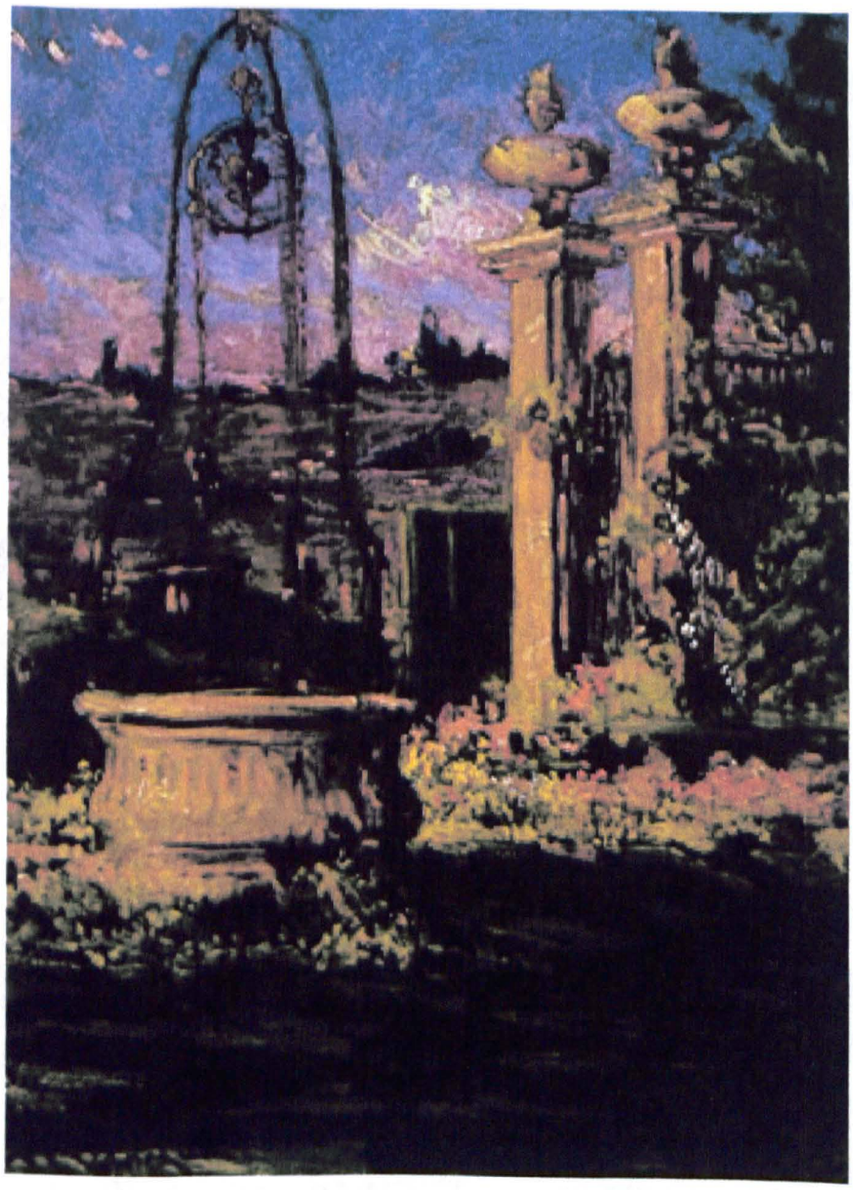
57: Poggio Gherardo, pergola path to south gate, Beevor, *A Tuscan Childhood*

58: Poggio Gherardo, main gates, Beevor, *A Tuscan Childhood*

59: Fortezza della Brunella, Aulla, Beevor, *A Tuscan Childhood*

60: Fortezza della Brunella, 'sky garden', Beevor, *A Tuscan Childhood*

61: Le Balze, lemon garden, Shacklock, *Villa le Balze*, p. 24

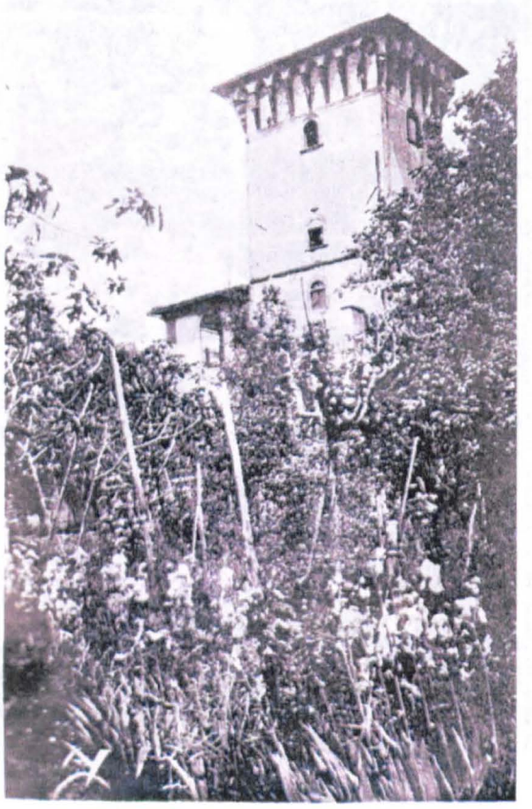


62: James Carroll Beckwith, *In the Garden of the Villa Palmieri*, 1910, Washington: Smithsonian

63: Villa Palmieri, lower terrace, author's photograph

64: Villa Palmieri, lemon garden, Masson, *Italian Gardens*, Plate 52

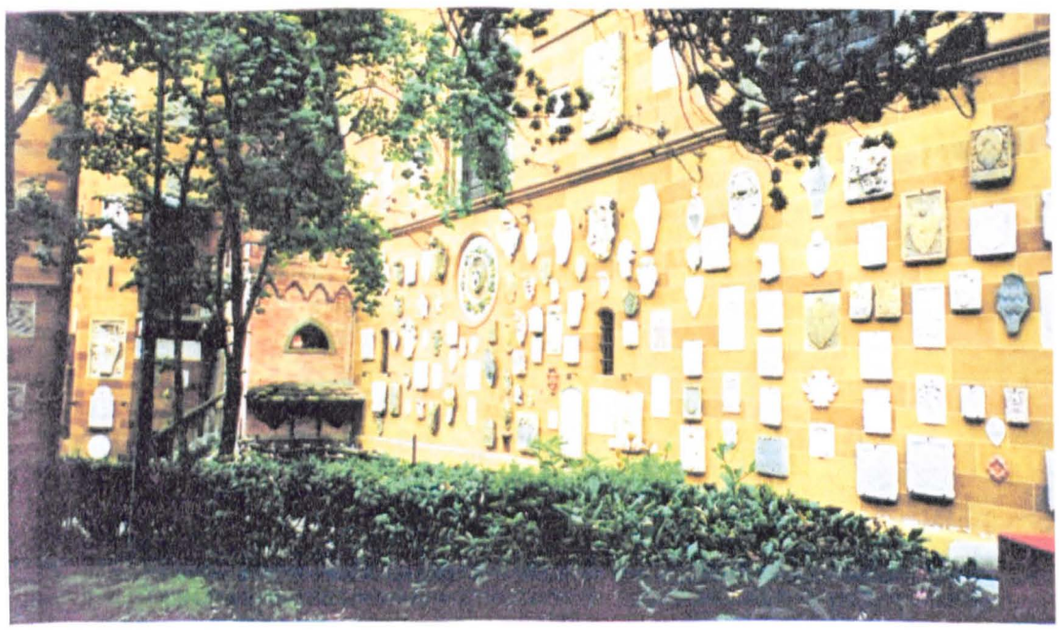
65: Henry Roderick Newman, *Torre di Bellosguardo*, 1887, New York: Vance Jordan Fine Art



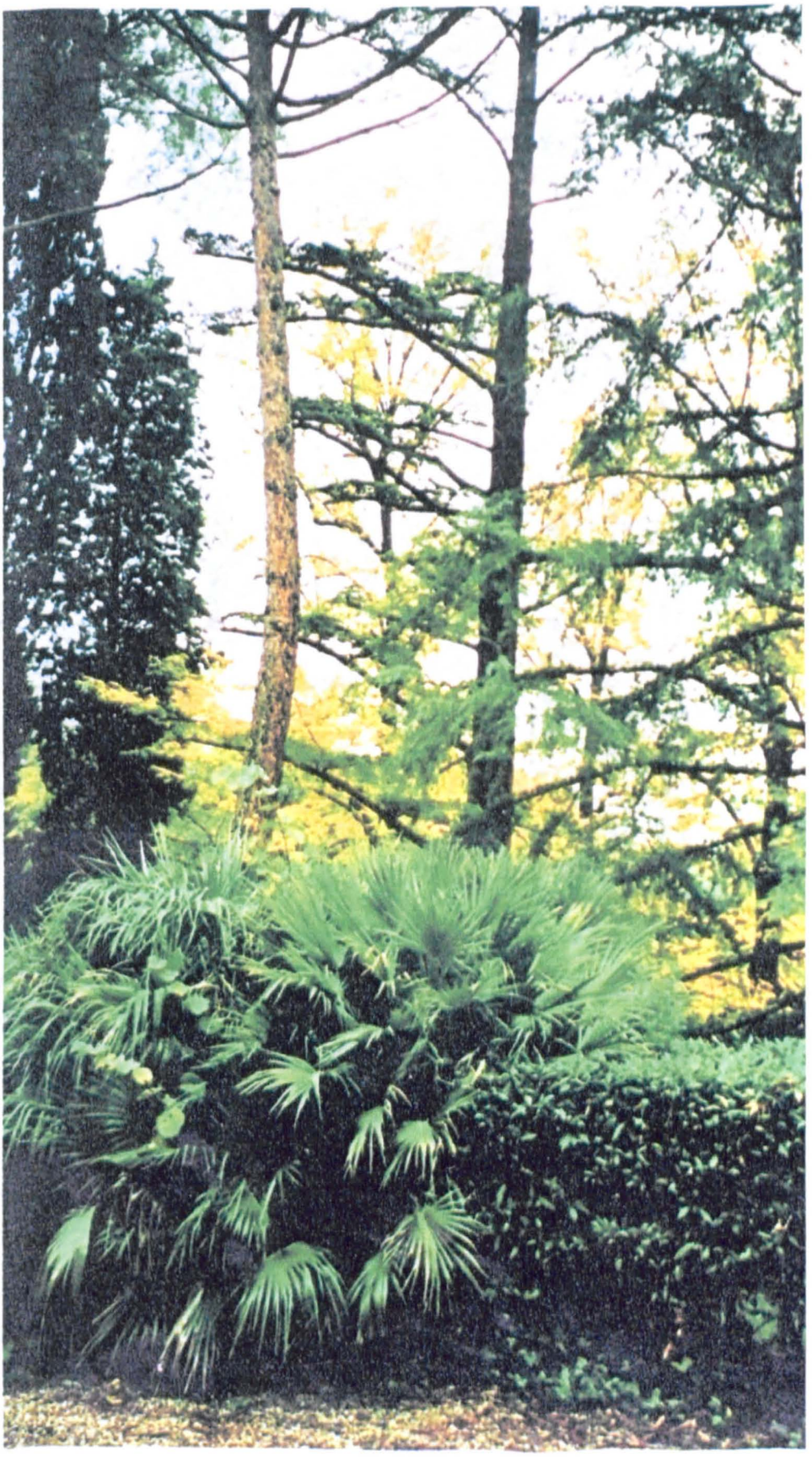
66: Bellosguardo, Paget, *Tower*, p. 310

67: Bellosguardo, Lady Paget in her homemade pre-Raphaelite gown against the north façade, Paget, *Tower*, p. 380

68: Villa Stibbert, Moorish pavilion, author's photograph



69: Villa Stibbert, front façade, author's photograph



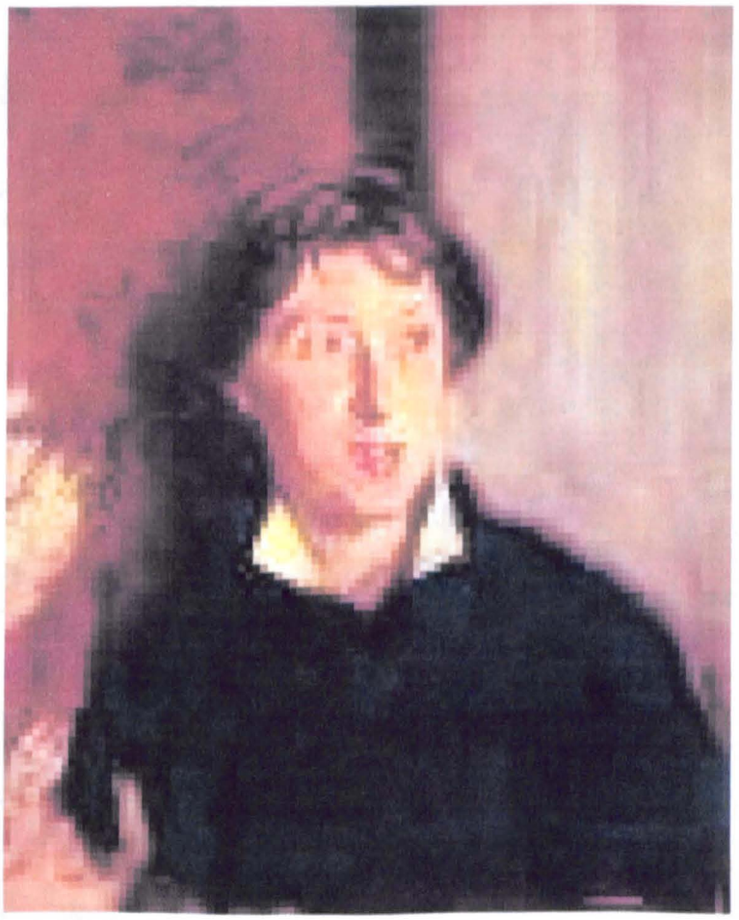
70: Villa Stibbert garden view, author's photograph

71: Villa Stibbert Egyptian temple, author's photograph

72: Georgina Graham's garden, Graham, *In a Tuscan Garden*, unnumbered plates

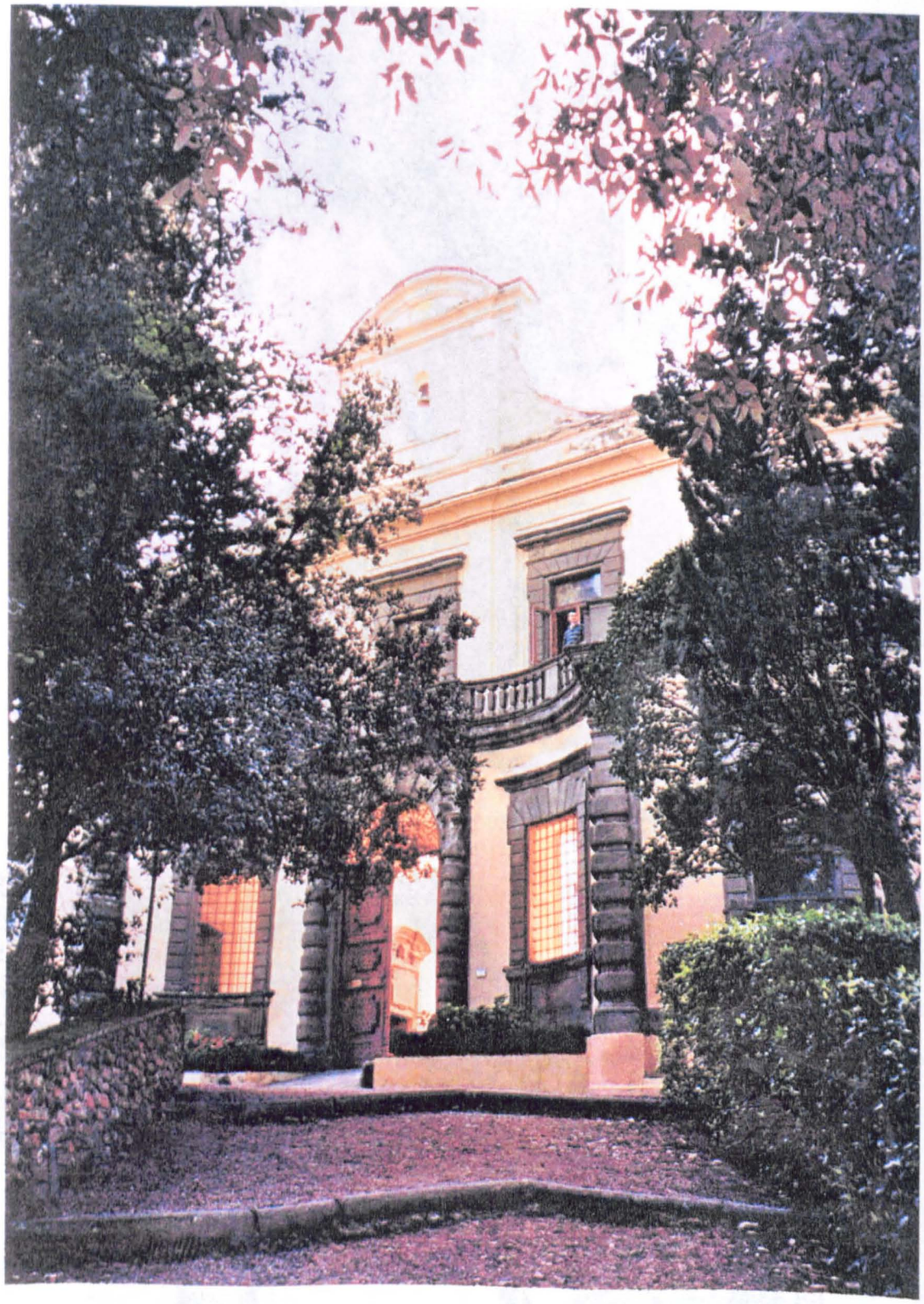
73: Joseph Lucas's villa, Lucas, *Our Villa in Italy*, unnumbered plate

74: Joseph Lucas's villa today as proposed by author, author's photograph



75: John Singer Sargent, *Vernon Lee*, London: Tate Gallery

76: Villa Palmerino, author's photograph

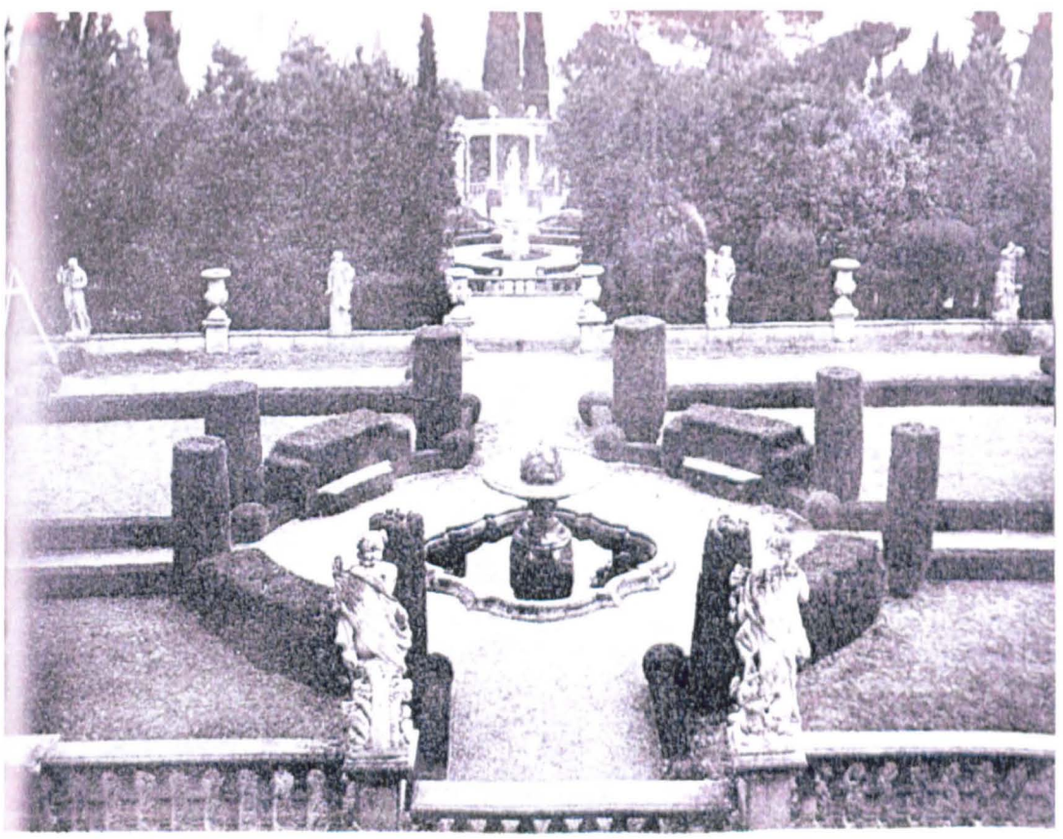


77: Montegufoni, baroque façade, author's photograph

78: Gino Severini, *Hall of Masks*, Montegufoni, circa 1921, detail, Pistelli, *The Castle of Montegufoni*, p. 145

79: Montegufoni, Latona grotto, author's photograph

80: La Pietra, pomario, author's photograph

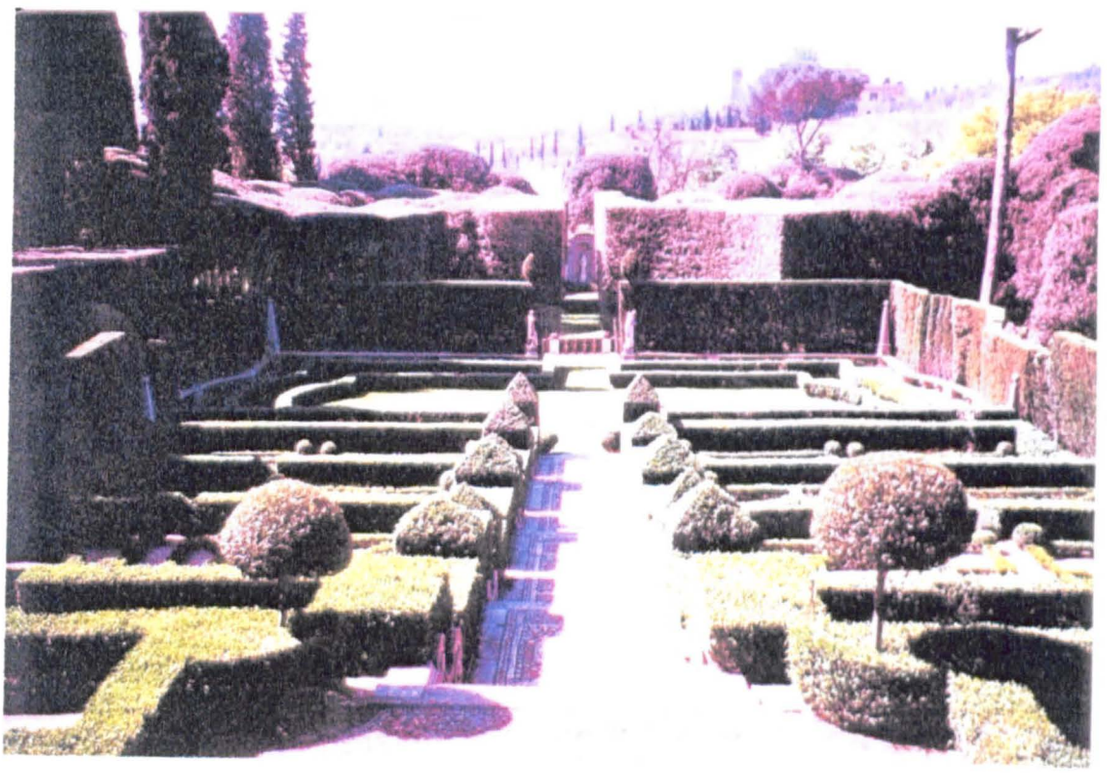


81: La Pietra, formal gardens, view from the main terrace, Turner, *La Pietra*, p. 47

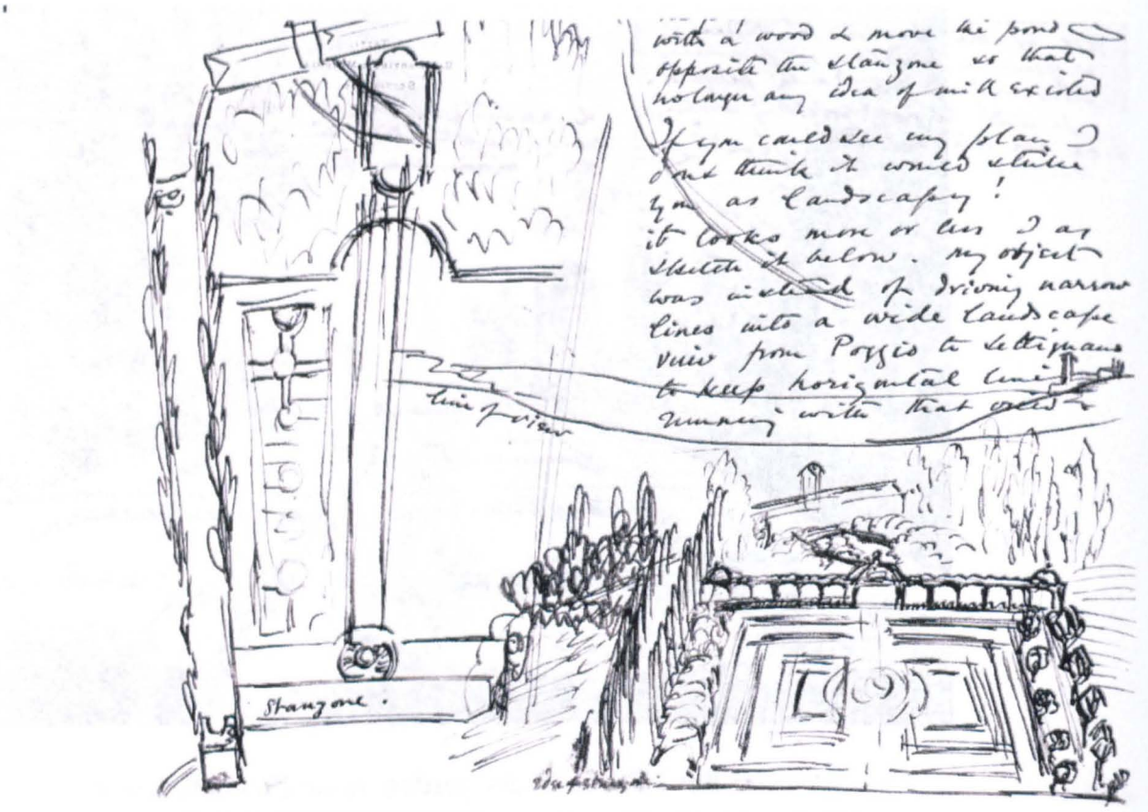
82: La Pietra, garden statue, author's photograph

83: Festivities at La Pietra, Turner, *La Pietra*, p. 58

84: I Tatti, library garden, author's photograph



85: I Tatti, formal garden, author's photograph



86: I Tatti, Waterfield's sketch of Pinsent's proposals, Florence, Janet Ross archive, British Institute, WAT: I:F:4:wf1-13, 8 November 1909

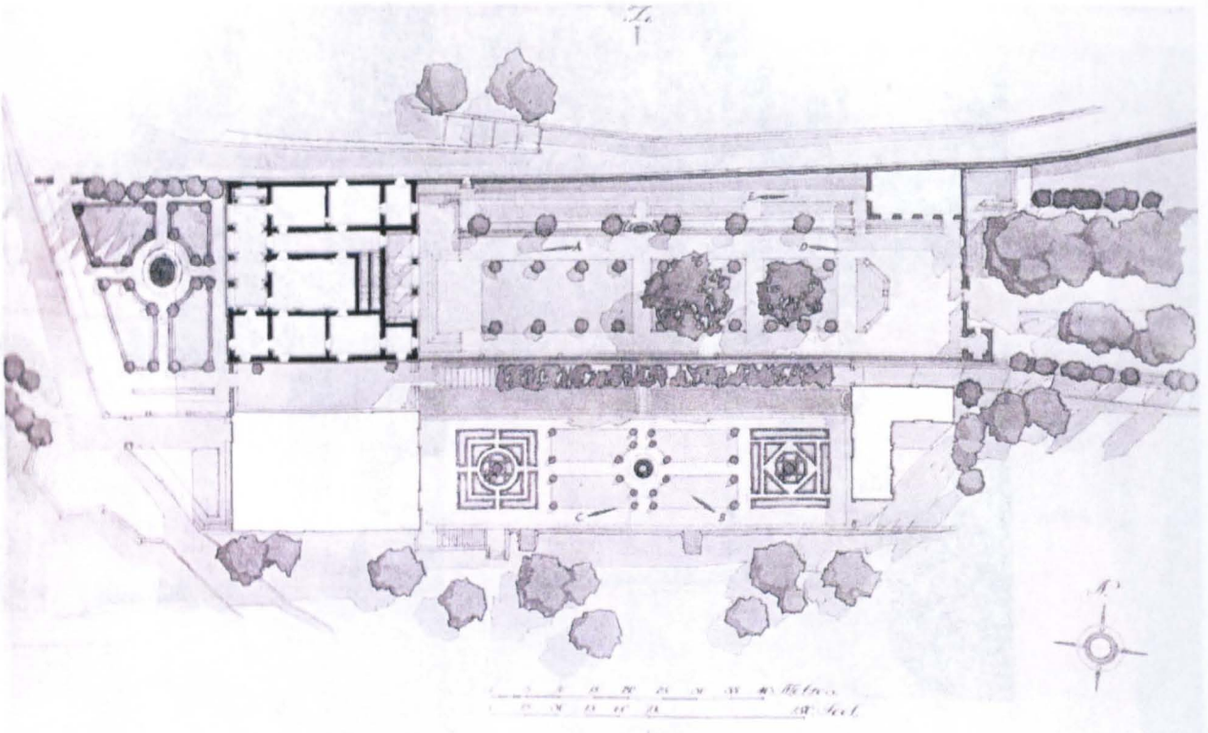
87: Le Balze, entrance pergola, Shacklock, *Villa le Balze*, p. 9

88: Le Balze, Triton grotto, Shacklock, *Villa le Balze*, p. 13

89: Biagio d'Antonio, *Annunciation*, detail of Villa Medici, late fifteenth century
Rome, Accademia di San Luca

90: Villa Medici, belvedere (on right), author's photograph

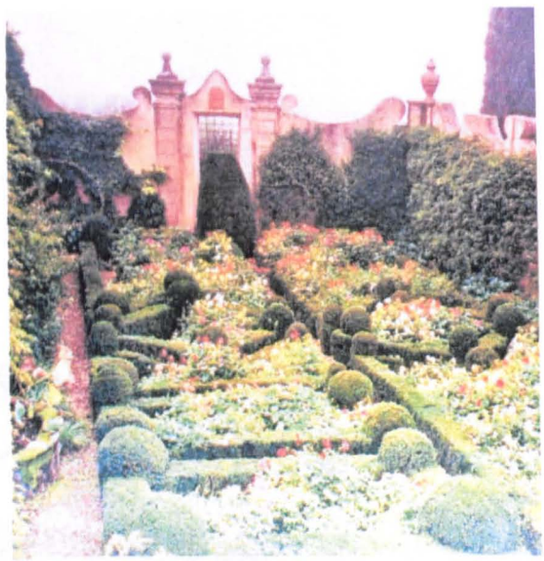
91: Villa Medici, limonaia, author's photograph



92: Villa Medici, plan, Shepherd and Jellicoe, *Italian Gardens of the Renaissance*, plate 5

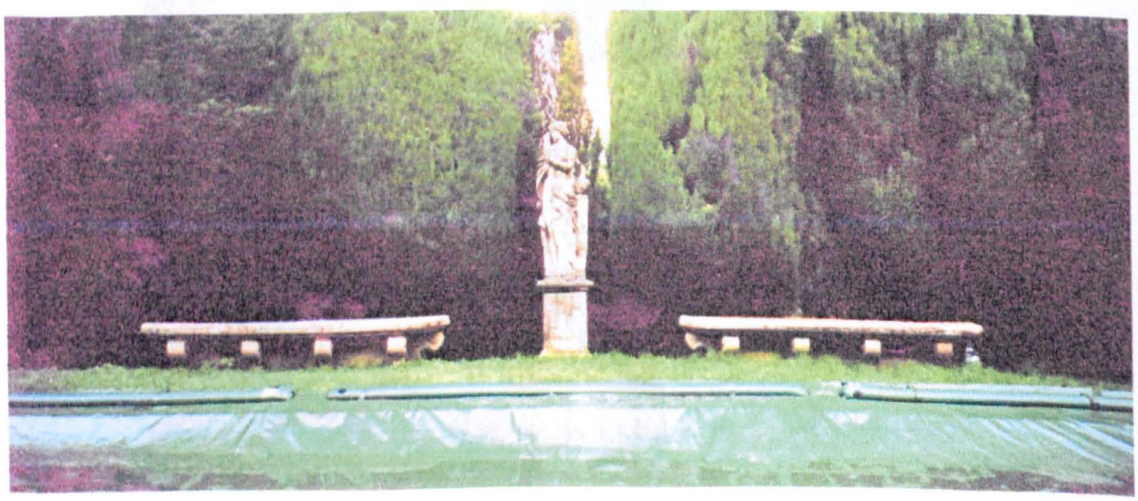
93: T Buonaiuti, *Veduta di Villa Mozzi*, detail, 1846, Mazzini, *Villa Medici, Fiesole*, p. 59

94: Villa Medici, giardino segreto, author's photograph



95: Villa Capponi, giardino segreto, author's photograph

96: Villa Capponi, south loggia, author's photograph

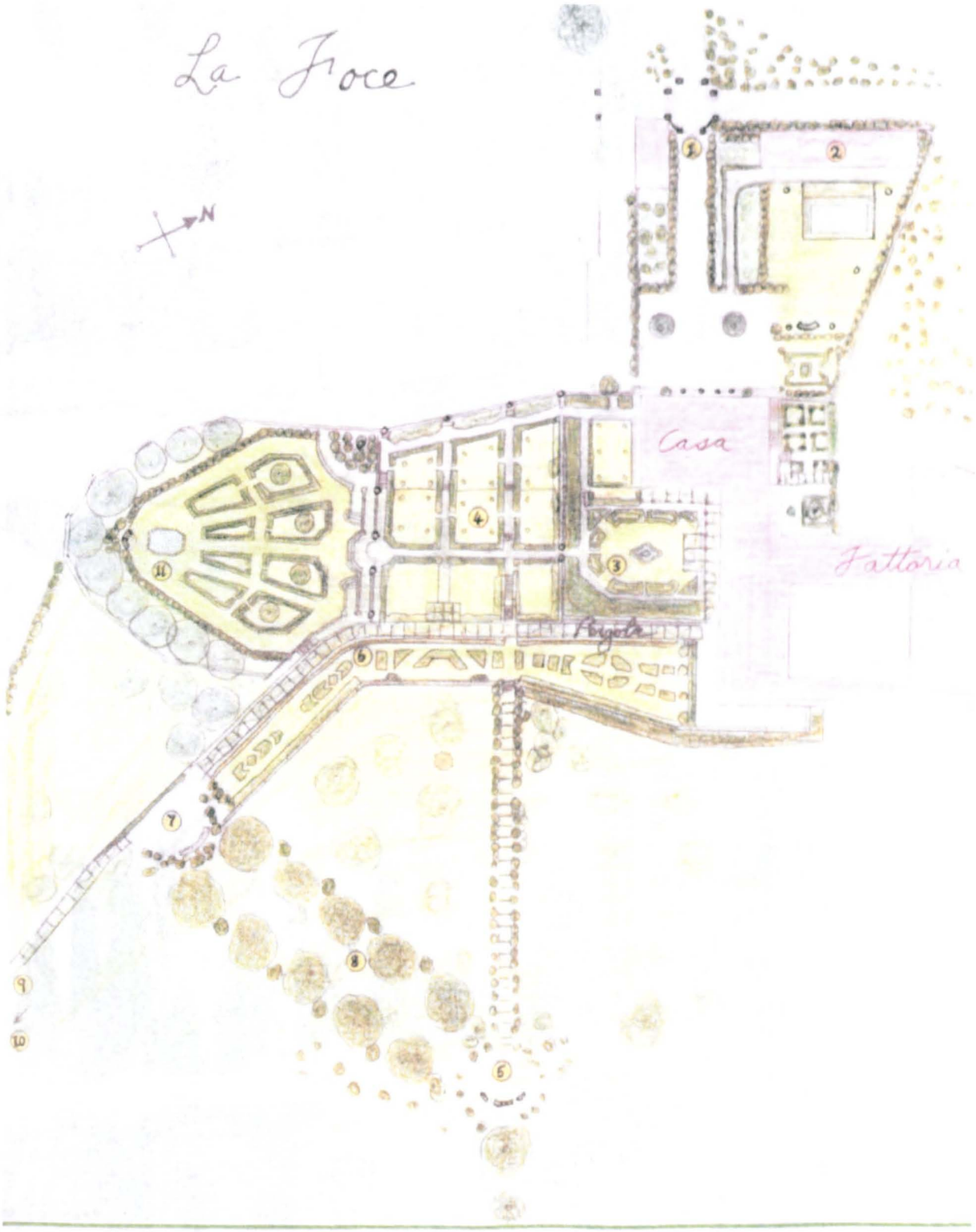


97: Villa Capponi, pool (covered for winter), author's photograph

98: La Foce, view of the clay hills, circa 1930, Origo, *La Foce*, p. 6

99: La Foce, ruined farmhouse, Origo, *Images and Shadows*, unnumbered plate

100: Sassetta, *Mystical Marriage of St. Francis with the Virtues*, fourteenth century, Chantilly: Musée Condé



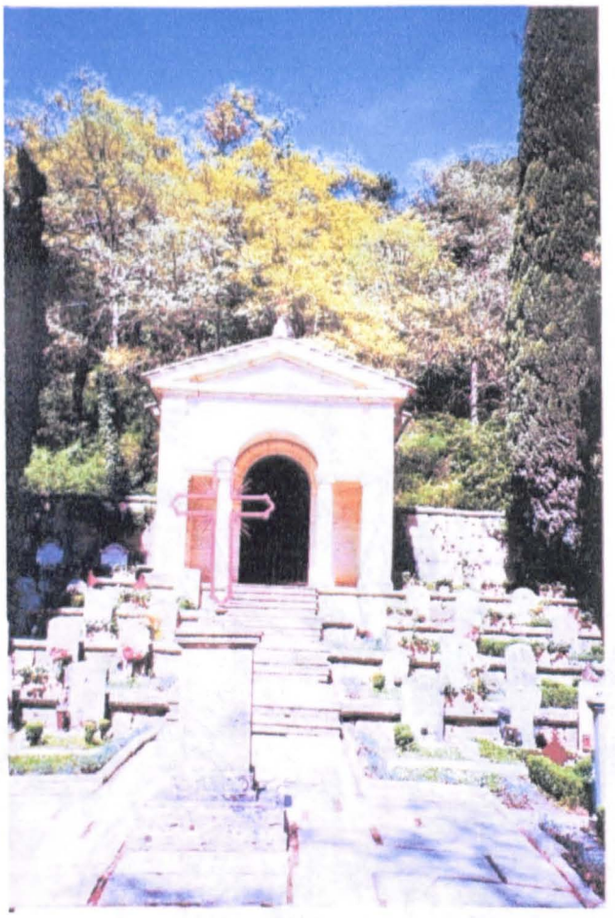
LA FOCE

101: La Foce, modern plan, provided to author by estate

102: La Foce, fountain garden, author's photograph

103: La Foce, limonaia, author's photograph

104: La Foce, wisteria pergola, author's photograph



105: La Foce, chapel, author's photograph

106: La Foce, lower garden and grotto, author's photograph

107: La Foce, cypress lined road on distant hill, author's photograph